

DROPOUTS AND A DROPOUT RECOVERY PROGRAM AT A SUBURBAN  
HIGH-POVERTY HIGH SCHOOL NEAR A LARGE URBAN AREA

A Record of Study

by

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## ABSTRACT

The decision to drop out of high school is a serious problem for the individual making the decision to drop out, but it also has dramatic implications for their families, their communities, and the economic health of the greater community. As a result, the literature on the causes of dropouts is prolific. However, I find that much of this literature is focused on blaming the students and their families for dropping out of high school. Thankfully, there is also much critique of the mainstream view as to the causes of dropouts. This critique of the mainstream literature places significant blame on our schools for causing students to drop out and considers schools—rather than students—at-risk for failing our students and actually pushing students out of school before they graduate. This critical view of the mainstream viewpoint focuses on the economic, social, and personal issues that cause students to be pushed out of school before they graduate. While this study surveys the mainstream literature on the subject of dropouts, the focus of this study supports the critical approach.

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to conduct an in-depth study of the students, and dropout prevention and recovery efforts in place at a high-poverty high school during the 2007 through 2013 academic years. A goal of the study was to create a profile of a dropout at the school during that time period and to begin to create a plan that will reduce the number of students who drop out of the high school as well as the other four high schools in the district.

Accordingly, for this study I examined quantitative data regarding students who dropped out of a high-poverty high school in order to look for patterns in the data that

may help in creating a profile of a dropout at the school. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with professional staff that worked at the school and students who recently attended the school. Half of the students interviewed had not dropped out of high school and the other half chose to drop out. The purpose of the interviews was to hear the perspectives of key individuals who have personally experienced the drop out problem in hopes that their voices would further contribute to the creation of a profile of a dropout and ultimately assist with solutions to the problem.

Findings support other research that shows there is no single predictor or indicator of what causes a student to dropout of high school. In fact, the data in the quantitative section about each individual dropout indicate that the dropouts possessed some or several of the typical dropout at-risk indicators such as being poor, have low-academic achievement, being previously retained, having a history of discipline problems, and having high absenteeism. While some of the students I interviewed possessed some of these same characteristics, not all did and in fact, interview data indicate that each student saw the importance of graduating and were frustrated that school and personal circumstances prevented this accomplishment. Another finding was that the adult interview data indicated traces of deficit thinking in how they were addressing the dropouts from their schools. Solutions suggested include addressing the deficit thinking, academic programming, and systems that need to be in place in order to better assist students who are at-risk for dropping out of high school.

## DEDICATION

To my husband, Howard B. Butler, Jr., who has encouraged me to stick with it and finish this work and has lived with me being “in school” throughout most of our 21-year marriage. His patience and help have meant more to me than he knows.

To my sisters, friends, and colleagues who have also encouraged me to stay the course and earn my doctorate. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

And to my parents, Archie and Winna Wilson, who raised me to continue to learn throughout my life and that I could accomplish anything if I put my mind and hard work into my efforts.

To Dr. Virginia Collier who kept me going throughout the process of earning my doctorate and never gave up on me.

To Dr. James Scheurich who stepped in after Dr. Collier retired and stayed with me until completion. And who taught me to see the issues of dropouts in a new way. I am forever in his debt.

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I would also like to acknowledge other committee members Dr. Lynn Burlbaw, who has stayed with me for many years as I struggled to find a worthy topic to study, gave me words of encouragement and showed great faith in my ability to get this done. I also acknowledge Dr. Terah Venzant Chambers and Dr. Gwendolyn Webb-Hasan who stepped in to serve on my committee after two previous committee members left the university. I am most appreciative of their willingness to serve when their plate was quite full with other doctoral candidates. Without this superb committee, I would not have been able to accomplish this work.

I owe considerable thanks to my editor, Leslie Locke, who has dedicated much of her free time in the last many months to help me write a quality study worthy of publication. She cheered me on and stayed with me as I struggled to get things right. I felt as if she was truly one of my lifelines.

In addition to aforementioned, I want to acknowledge my colleagues at work in my school district for their constant encouragement, for serving as professional advisors

in the peer debrief process, and in general serving as a tremendous source of support.

One colleague in particular helped me process my thinking in Chapter V as I struggled to write about some revealing issues in the high school and district where I work. For this, I owe him a great deal of gratitude. I am not revealing the names of these special colleagues to protect their identity but they know who they are.

I also want to acknowledge the staff at Eagle Fork High School for trusting me enough to open up and share their frustrations about the dropout situation and all the surrounding issues they face as professionals at Eagle Fork High School. They are extremely hard working, dedicated public school employees and I am grateful for their participation in this study.

Finally, I acknowledge the special students who agreed to share their stories with me as we sat for interviews. Their stories were compelling and have reshaped my thinking about dropouts and what we need to do as a public school system to stop pushing students out of school. Their smiles and words are forever etched in my mind.

## NOMENCLATURE

PEIMS	Public Education Information Management System
EFHS	Eagle Fork High School
BVISD	Bay View Independent School District
TEA	Texas Education Agency
AEIS	Academic Excellence Indicator System

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

There is a tremendous emphasis in schools in the United States to ensure that all students in the nation's public K-12 system graduate from high school so that they may then further their education by entering and ultimately graduating from a college or a university. The focus has shifted in the last few decades from a goal focused on graduation from high school to a goal that is focused on successfully graduating from a college or a university (Conley, Hiatt, McGaughy, Seburn & Venezia, 2010). At the very least, public schools work toward a goal of ensuring that students complete some form of post-high school education such as military training, a trade school, or an associate's degree. But there is a challenge that most schools face as they work toward this goal. Despite efforts to ensure all students successfully graduate from high school, some students tragically do not make it to high school graduation and drop out. There is a considerable amount of research, which will be presented in Chapter II, that asks educators to look within their institutions for the reason students do not graduate. Too often, educators and greater society blame the students for dropping out when, in fact, it is the school and/or school system that, because of inflexible practices and a failure to meet students' needs, actually pushes students out of school.

When students drop out of high school, the ripple effect is felt within the school, the local community, the state, and the nation. Dropouts typically do not add to the economic and intellectual growth of their communities. Supporting dropouts weakens the community and its ability to enrich the state. As stated in the Alliance for Excellent

Education Issue Brief (2006), “Individuals’ potential contributions to the economy increase in accordance with their educational attainments. Therefore, for each student who does not graduate from high school, does enter college, or does not complete college with a degree, the economy suffers” (p. 2). Furthermore, a state without an educated population weakens national initiatives. One could add that the global community is affected as well. Educators have an ethical obligation to ensure students graduate from high school, and as such must do nothing that stands in the way of a student earning a high school diploma. Moreover, educators must act with a moral imperative to ensure each student graduates from high school. To do this, educators must not blame the students, their families, economic status, or ethnicity. Instead, they must look at how the school system may be causing students to be at-risk of dropping out—the programming, procedures, attitudes of staff and community, and curriculum—are just a few ways schools contribute to the drop out rate. We need to look at what we are doing to push students out of school before they earn their diploma.

The Texas State Board of Educator Certification states in Texas Administrative Code Title 19, Part 7, Chapter 247.1(b), *Educator’s Code of Ethics* (2010), “The Texas Educator, in accepting a position of public trust, shall measure success by the progress of each student toward the realization of his or her potential as an effective citizen” (para. 2). By earning the high school diploma, our students are afforded future choices as citizens, such as continuing their education, learning a trade, joining the military, and/or immediately joining the workforce. Without the high school diploma, there may be fewer choices in terms of careers and quality of life. Educators have a responsibility and

obligation to educate all students to be successful in life after he or she earns a high school diploma. Public school systems must ensure all students stay in high school until they successfully graduate and are fully prepared to be effective and productive citizens.

Why do students drop out of high school? Why and when does the spiral of disengagement from school begin? What are the causes, and who are the students who decide to drop out? Why should society care if some students decide to leave the educational system before they earn a high school diploma? This qualitative case study will seek answers to these questions and search for solutions to the dropout dilemma at Eagle Fork High School (EFHS) in the Bayou View Independent School District (BVISD) in Houston, Texas. Both the names of the school and school district have been changed for this Record of Study, as have the names of all participants. School and district data were also somewhat altered to disguise the identity of the district.

### **Context of the Study**

Bill White (2008), former mayor of Houston, expressed concern about the dropout rates in the United States, stating he viewed maintaining an educated workforce as the most important issue facing our country in the global marketplace. White went on to state that without an educated citizenry, the United States will see decreased earning capacity and increased social costs. Like the national problem of high school dropouts, this problem also exists in the state of Texas and in many schools and districts throughout the state including the EFHS and BVISD in Houston. BVISD has begun work to examine the dropout problem through a systemic lens.

BVISD does not see the same high dropout rate at the high school level as many other urban school districts, but the district is concerned nonetheless. One dropout is considered too many. One of the district's goals published in the *Five Year Educational Plan* (2006) was that all students experience postsecondary success. Inherent in this goal was the idea that all BVISD students will graduate from high school within four years and then pursue and enter postsecondary options such as a trade school, a two-year community college, the U.S. military, or a four-year university program. If the goal is for all BVISD students to experience postsecondary success, then all students must first receive a high school diploma.

BVISD has experienced numerous successes in recent years and continues to have a reputation among public school systems in the nation for success and innovation. One of the successes includes a Texas Education Agency (TEA) *Recognized* rating for the 2009-2010 academic year. As noted in the most recent *Annual Report to the Community* (2010), BVISD students exceeded the state standard for students who met the TEA's College Readiness Standards in the areas of English/Language Arts and Mathematics. The number of students who participated in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate exams was at nearly twice the state rate and the average of BVISD student's SAT and ACT scores were also higher than the state average. BVISD has an Early College Program, tremendous support from the local community, and a major focus on postsecondary success. While the district completion rates exceed state levels, the district faces challenges meeting the goal of all students experiencing postsecondary success. Nearly half of the African American and Hispanic graduates in



2008 were attending college or other postsecondary training as compared to approximately two-thirds of White and 60% of Asian graduates. In addition, high school completion rates for White students at near 100% are greater than those for African American (85%), Hispanic (89%), and economically disadvantaged (90%) students (TEA, 2011). For a district so focused on postsecondary success and ensuring all students are successful once they leave BVISD, these last two statistics are sobering and indicate a need for focused attention on the traditionally underserved student population (students of color, students from low-income homes) in the district to ensure they graduate from high school.

More detailed information about BVISD and EFHS will be included in Chapter III.

### **Problem Statement**

The Bayou View Independent School District (BVISD) in Houston has a primary goal that every student graduate from high school and engage in some form of postsecondary education. BVISD had a comprehensive dropout rate of 2.5% in 2009, which is less than the state average of 3.2%. However, the district's dropout rate for African American and Hispanic students was nearly 5.0% and 3.0% respectfully (TEA, 2010). The 2010-2011 Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) Report reflected the comprehensive dropout rate for the 2009-2010 school year as 1.0% as compared to the state rate of 1.7%. Therefore, one problem facing the district involves the students who drop out prior to graduation. Based on the 2010-2011 AEIS report, the school's demographic data included an ethnic breakdown as follows, 5.0% African American

students, 88% Hispanic students, 40% White students, 1.0% Asian/Pacific students, and 3.0% Native American students (TEA, 2012). The same report indicated a total enrollment of approximately 2,000 students with approximately 650 students in Grade 9, 540 students in Grade 10, 447 students in Grade 11, and 420 students in Grade 12 (TEA, 2012). The percent of students qualifying for free/reduced meals and as such, labeled as economically disadvantaged, was 85%, and 25% of the students were labeled as Limited English Proficient (TEA, 2012).

A secondary problem in BVISD, as a whole, involves the lack of a profile for a dropout in the district or for any of the high schools. This lack of a profile is primarily due to the lack of an analysis regarding which factors have the greatest impact on causing a student to drop out of high school. As this has not been done, currently any information targeting dropout prevention is general in nature and may not meet the needs of specific campuses, including Eagle Fork High School.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Due to the lack of specific data on students who drop out of Eagle Fork High School (EFHS), the purpose of this inquiry was to conduct an in-depth study of the students attending EFHS regarding dropout prevention and recovery efforts in place at the school during the 2007 through 2013 academic years for the purpose of creating a profile of a dropout at the school during that time period. An additional goal was to develop a plan to reduce the number of students who drop out of EFHS and thus in the district as a whole. The dropout programs currently in place in the district and on the EFHS campus are described later in this chapter and in Chapter IV with the interview

data. The profile of the students and the programs were analyzed to develop a dropout prevention and recovery plan based on the EFHS data. The current efforts in place are presented as a basis for recommending a more focused program for the campus.

EFHS is one of four comprehensive high schools in the BVISD. Furthermore, and because the demographics of the district include primarily the three distinct ethnic groups of Hispanic, African American, and White, the dropout research on these three ethnic groups is reported here. Included within these three ethnic groups in the district is the economically disadvantaged sub-population.

### **Dropout Data and Background Information**

Currently, the BVISD student demographics are 5.1% African American, 58% Hispanic, 28% White, 6.2% Asian, and 58.7% economically disadvantaged (Bayou View Independent School District, 2012).

In May 2008, the District's Alternative Education Task Force had just completed its work of looking into various ways to provide more flexibility in a high school student's program by offering more on-line courses, mini-mesters, internships, and accelerated programming. The district did ultimately decide to close a special school for students considered at-risk for dropping out and instead create a new district program in the same facility. This new program would offer various programs for high school students from the five high schools in the district. One of the recommendations from the Alternative Education Task Force had been to hire a Dropout Prevention Facilitator (DPF) who would monitor potential dropouts and recommend programming for these students. This person was hired in the fall of 2009 and spent the 2009-2010 academic

year assessing various efforts at the campus and district level to prevent and recover dropouts along with researching best practices across the state and nation. Prior to the beginning of the 2010-2011 academic year, the DPF was reassigned from the Director over the new program servicing all high school students in the district, to the district's Executive Director for Secondary Teaching and Learning. The reason for this reassignment was the belief there is a strong link between preventing a student from dropping out of high school and a student's educational program. At the beginning of the 2010-2011 academic year, the DPF met with the Executive Director for Secondary Teaching and Learning to report her findings after spending the 2009-2010 academic year researching dropout prevention strategies and programs found district-wide and those found at individual campuses. A primary finding involved the inconsistency of programs and practices between the high school campuses, a lack of dropout prevention/recovery programming, and to some degree, practices from the central office. Her observations and recommendations are stated in Appendix A. No mention was made in the report about the *push out* factors such as a lack of relevant curriculum, high stakes testing, strict adherence to attendance requirements for course credit, and other academic programming. These factors will be discussed further in Chapter II.

The next step in the BVISD plan was to ensure every student graduates from high school and is prepared for postsecondary success and to create processes, practices, and programs that will help to prevent high school dropouts. All recommendations from the Dropout Prevention Facilitator and the Graduation Success Task Force were considered as the plan was developed.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study shed light on the issues surrounding the dropout situation in the BVISD and more specifically at EFHS. A better understanding of the complexities of the dropout problem occurred and a better picture of the various causes of why students chose to drop out of high school surfaced. This study also contributed to the field of literature surrounding dropouts in Houston, Texas, and the nation. Ultimately, the hope is because of studying the issues, a solid solution(s) can be found to keep all our students in high school so they have a host of opportunities awaiting them after receiving the high school diploma.

### **Overview of Methodology**

The design of this study included the use of quantitative and qualitative methodology in collecting and analyzing data on Eagle Fork High School (EFHS) dropouts for the 2007-2008, 2008-2009, 2009-2010, 2010-2011, 2011-2012, and 2012-2013 academic years. Quantitative data were used to provide triangulation and were taken from the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) and district records. Qualitative data on the existing and previous dropout prevention or recovery programs on the campus and in the district were obtained from interviews with the principal of EFHS and school staff who worked at the school for some or all of the 2007 through 2013 school years. Other key individuals who were interviewed included former EFHS students who had either dropped out or successfully completed high school.

The following quantitative data were collected on each student who dropped out of high school between the years of 2007 and 2013 and were used in the study.

- Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) District Report for 2007-2008, 2008-2009, 2009-2010, 2010-2011, 2011-2012, and 2012-2013
- BVISD and EFHS dropout data by school for 2007-2008, 2008-2009, 2009-2010, 2010-2011, 2011-2012, and 2012-2013
  - District PEIMS Leaver Data
    - Student names
    - Ethnicity of each student
    - Age and grade classification when student dropped out of school
    - Reason for dropping out as reported by BVISD Leaver Data
    - Retention or grade repetition in high school and if so, what grade
  - District Student Management System Data (*SASI/SKYWARD*)
    - Course failure history for each student in middle and high school
    - Elective course enrollment in high school
    - Discipline infractions for each student in middle and high school

- Attendance history for each student in middle and high school
- Programs used in the district to prevent students from dropping out of high school from 2007 and 2013.

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the profile of a dropout at Eagle Fork High School between the years of 2007 and 2013 as defined by the following characteristics:
  - a. Ethnicity
  - b. Age and grade classification when they dropped out
  - c. Stated reason for dropping out as reported by the student
  - d. Core course failure history in middle and high school
  - e. Discipline infractions in middle and high school
  - f. Enrollment in elective courses in high school
  - g. Attendance history
  - h. Retention or grade repetition in high school and if so, what grade
  - i. Economically disadvantaged

Each of the above characteristics dominated the literature in terms of possible risk factors for causing a student to drop out of high school and was, therefore, chosen as a basis for analyzing the characteristics of a dropout at EFHS (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Cunningham, 2007; Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007; Stearns & Glennie, 2006).

2. What is causing students to dropout of EFHS?

3. What are the perceptions of EFHS staff and former students regarding the causes of dropouts and the success of dropout prevention efforts?
4. What programs are currently in place and were in place within the 2007 through 2013 school years at Eagle Fork High School to address the dropout problem?
5. What recommendations can be made to Eagle Fork High School and Bayou Vista Independent School District regarding dropout prevention and recovery as a result of this analysis?

### **Definitions**

*At-risk:* For purposes of this study, “student at-risk of dropping out of school” includes each student who is under 21 years of age and who:

- (1) was not advanced from one grade level to the next for one or more school years;
- (2) if the student is in grade 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, or 12, did not maintain an average equivalent to 70 on a scale of 100 in two or more subjects in the foundation curriculum during a semester in the preceding or current school year or is not maintaining such an average in two or more subjects in the foundation curriculum in the current semester;
- (3) did not perform satisfactorily on an assessment instrument administered to the student under Subchapter B, Chapter 39, and who has not in the previous or current school year subsequently performed on that instrument or another



appropriate instrument at a level equal to at least 110 percent of the level of satisfactory performance on that instrument;

(4) if the student is in prekindergarten, kindergarten, or grade 1, 2, or 3, did not perform satisfactorily on a readiness test or assessment instrument administered during the current school year;

(5) is pregnant or is a parent;

(6) has been placed in an alternative education program in accordance with Section 37.006 during the preceding or current school year;

(7) has been expelled in accordance with Section 37.007 during the preceding or current school year;

(8) is currently on parole, probation, deferred prosecution, or other conditional release;

(9) was previously reported through the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) to have dropped out of school;

(10) is a student of limited English proficiency, as defined by Section 29.052;

(11) is in the custody or care of the Department of Protective and Regulatory Services or has, during the current school year, been referred to the department by a school official, officer of the juvenile court, or law enforcement official;

(12) is homeless, as defined by 42 U.S.C. Section 11302, and its subsequent amendments; or

(13) resided in the preceding school year or resides in the current school year in a residential placement facility in the district, including a detention facility,

substance abuse treatment facility, emergency shelter, psychiatric hospital, halfway house, or foster group home. (Texas Education Code Section 29.081)

*Attendance History:* The number of absences and tardies recorded for each student by semester in high school during their high school enrollment.

*Attendance Rate:* The percentage of days a student attends school during the academic year.

*Class:* The students from a cohort with a final status of graduate, continuer, GED recipient, or dropout.

*Cohort Membership:* All students tracked from the beginning year through the fall after the expected graduation, regardless of final status. A student belongs to one and only one cohort. A student who is retained in grade or graduates early is not moved to another cohort.

*District Alternative Education Placement (DAEP):* An alternative educational setting for behavioral management. Students can be removed from their school and sent to the DAEP if they:

- Engage in conduct punishable as a felony.
- Commit a series of specified serious offenses while on school property or attending a school-sponsored activity.
- Commit other violations specified in student ‘codes of conduct’ developed by individual school districts (Intercultural Development Research Association, 1999).

*Dropout:* A student who leaves school during one of the years in high school in which the student's cohort was in high school and the student did not return and graduate, continue in school, receive a GED, or leave for one of the 13 non-dropout leaver reasons outlined by the Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2011).

*Dropout Prevention:* Intentional efforts and initiatives to specifically target students at-risk for dropping out in an effort to inhibit them from dropping out from high school.

*Dropout Rate:* The annual dropout rate is the percentage of students who drop out of school during one school year. An annual dropout rate is calculated by dividing the number of students who drop out during a single school year by the total number of students who enrolled the same year (TEA, 2010).

*Dropout Recovery:* Intentional efforts and initiatives to identify and locate students who have dropped out of high school in order to have them reenroll in high school.

*Ethnicity:* "... the sameness of a band or nation of people who share common customs, traditions, historical experiences, and in some instances geographical residence" (Trimble & Dickerson, 2005, para. 1).

*Native American:* "...an American Indian or Alaska Native person is someone who has blood degree from and is recognized as such by a federally recognized tribe or village (as an enrolled tribal member) and/or the United States. Of course, blood quantum (the degree of American Indian or Alaska Native blood only means by which a person is considered to be an American Indian or Alaska Native. Other factors, such as a person's knowledge of his or her tribe's culture, history, language, religion, familial kinships, and how strongly a person identifies himself or herself as American Indian or Alaska Native,

are also important” (U.S. Department of the Interior Indian Affairs, Section IV, para. 44).

*Asian:* “A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam. It includes "Asian Indian," "Chinese," "Filipino," "Korean," "Japanese," "Vietnamese," and "Other Asian" (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010, p. 3).

*Black or African American:* “A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa. It includes people who indicate their race as "Black, African Am., or Negro," or provide written entries such as African American, Afro American, Kenyan, Nigerian, or Haitian” (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010, p. 3).

*Hispanic or Latino:* ““Hispanic or Latino’ refers to a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, p. 2).

*Pacific Islander:* “A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands. It includes people who indicate their race as "Native Hawaiian," "Guamanian or Chamorro," "Samoan," and "Other Pacific Islander" (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010, p. 3).

*White:* “A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. It includes people who indicate their race as "White" or report entries such as Irish, German, Italian, Lebanese, Near Easterner, Arab, or Polish” (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010, p. 3).

*Economically Disadvantaged:* An economically disadvantaged student is a student who is a member of a household that meets the income eligibility guidelines for free or reduced-price meals (less than or equal to 85% of Federal Poverty Guidelines) under the National School Lunch Program.

*Elective Courses:* Any course taken in high school other than the four core academic courses – Mathematics, English/Language Arts, Science, Social Studies.

*Core Courses:* Core courses are any math, science, English/Language Arts, or social studies course required as part of the high school curriculum to meet graduation requirements.

*Course Failure:* Occurs when a student does not meet the passing standard of an average grade of 70 for the course in order to receive credit.

*Failure History:* The number of courses a student fails in their high school career.

*Grade Classification:* The number of credits required for each grade level in BVISD:

- 9<sup>th</sup> grade: 0 state credits
- 10<sup>th</sup> grade: 5 state credits
- 11<sup>th</sup> grade: 11 state credits
- 12<sup>th</sup> grade: 17 state credits

*Overage:* A student whose age is greater than the standard age for a particular grade level, thereby, signifying one or more retentions in the student's academic career.

*PEIMS:* Public Education Information Management System for the Texas Education Agency.

*Programs:* Intentional efforts to prevent students from dropping out and recovering those students who dropped out.

*Recognized Rating:*

- $\geq 80\%$  of all students (White, Hispanic, African American, and Economically disadvantaged met or exceeded every Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) Test
- $\geq 15\%$  of all students met Commended Performance Standard on all TAKS test
- $\geq 60\%$  of English language Learners (ELL) met the standard for ELL Progress on the TAKS test.
- $\geq 85\%$  of all students and Economically Disadvantaged students met the completion rate for graduation. (TEA, 2010, pp. 11-22)

*Retention or grade repetition:* A student is retained or repeats a grade level when they do not earn enough credits to move to the next grade level.

*SASI:* Student management system in use through the 2009 – 2010 school year in Bayou View Independent School District.

*SKYWARD:* Student management system in use beginning during the 2010 – 2011 academic year in Bayou View Independent School District.

*TEA:* Texas Education Agency is a governmental body in the state of Texas responsible for public education.

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

One assumption was that all data collected between 2007 and 2013 were accurately recorded and reported by BVISD personnel. It was also assumed that the descriptions of the programs by district personnel were accurate.

A limitation was that it was assumed that the profile of a dropout between 2007 and 2013 was predictive of future dropouts. As no changes in campus population are anticipated, this limitation should not be substantive.

### **Organization of the Study**

The Record of Study is organized in a chapter format. Chapter I contains the introduction to the study and the explanation of methodology. Chapter II is a review of the literature regarding conventional and critical views regarding the causes of dropouts and dropout prevention and/or recovery. Chapter III discusses the methodology and analysis of the data regarding the BVISD dropouts. Chapter IV presents the findings and results of this study. Chapter V presents a discussion of the results, implications for practice, implications for future research, and personal reflections the researcher learned from this study.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### **Introduction**

This chapter will include a review of scholarly literature related to the causes behind a student's reason for leaving the public school system before high school graduation. The purpose of this chapter is to answer the question, *what really causes a student to drop out of high school?* The first section of the chapter will review the data to determine who is dropping out of high school in terms of the age, ethnicity, and gender. The next section will be a discussion on the economic and societal impact of high school dropouts. The conventional thought on the causes of dropping out will be presented, next followed by a critical view of the causes of dropping out. A comparative analysis between the two thoughts on the causes of dropouts will be presented. The final section of the chapter will discuss dropout prevention and recovery efforts found in the literature and how they connect with the conventional and critical views of the causes of dropping out.

The conventional reasons that will be presented are what one might expect to be found in the research. These reasons tend to blame the students, their families, neighborhoods, race/ethnicity, and income for dropping out of high school. However, reasons far more compelling, and reasons this researcher favors, were also found in the literature. These reasons provide an alternative perspective and one that does not blame the students or their life circumstances for failure. Within this perspective, instead of blaming the student, the fault is placed on the school systems, educators, and greater



society. From this point of view, schools are failing the students and in most cases, students are *pushed out* of the school from which they hope to graduate instead of choosing to drop out of high school. It is for this reason that a critical view of the typical causes of dropping out must be presented because until educators look within themselves or their schools, we will continue to see our students leave school before earning the high school diploma. This is simply not acceptable.

### **Who Is Dropping Out of High School?**

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2010), the 2008 status dropout rate in the United States was eight percent. The status dropout rate “...represents the percentage of 16- through 24- year-olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential (either a diploma or an equivalency credential such as a General Educational Development [GED] certificate)” (NCES, 2008, p. 1). The report cautions its readers to interpret the figure of eight percent with caution as the “...estimates are unstable” (NCES, 2008, p. 1). There may be other students who decide to drop out of school before age 16 and therefore are not included in the eight percent status dropout rate in the report. However, of the students inclusive of the eight percent, 4.8% were White, 9.9% were African American, 18.3% were Hispanic, 4.4% were Asian/Pacific Islander, and 14.6% were Native American/Alaskan Native (NCES, 2008). While this is a great improvement since 1980, when the overall dropout rate was 14.1%, with 11.4% White, 19.1% African American, and 35.2% Hispanic (no data was available for Asian/Pacific Islander or Native American /Alaskan

Native that year), the numbers of students not completing high school is alarming and unacceptable (NCES, 2008).

The large number of dropouts is another dilemma that faces all educators and communities. There are significant gaps between the dropout rates of White, African American, and Hispanic youths. Almost half of Hispanic youth and a little more than half of African American and Native American youth fail to graduate when compared to two-thirds of White students (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006). This is especially concerning because as populations of color are increasing in the U.S., our economic future is increasingly dependent on these groups. However, our schools are continuing to see fewer students of color graduating from high school compared to White students. In confirmation, Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) stated, “The overall national dropout rate appears to be between 22 and 25%, but the rate is higher among black and Hispanic students, and it has not changed much in recent decades” (p. 77).

The Alliance for Excellent Education (2009) released a snapshot report that stated “...graduation rates must be a cornerstone of high school accountability and used in decision making about the targeting of resources and intervention to low-performing schools” (p. 1). The report also stated: “According to the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, about 65% of all students in Texas graduate from high school with a regular diploma in four years” (p. 1). The report more specifically addressed the gaps in graduation rates between Whites and students of color in Texas as seen in the 2005-2006 academic year. The graduation rate for Asian students was 85%, for White students was 76%, for Hispanic students was 56%, and for African Americans was 53% (Alliance for

Excellent Education, 2009). These rates show a 14% gap between White and Hispanic graduation rates. Furthermore, the report reinforces points made previously about the earning capacity of high school dropouts and high school graduates. The report noted an earning gap of \$10,000 a year between high school graduates and dropouts as well as challenges facing the dropout in terms of finding lucrative employment (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). In addition, when a student drops out of high school, the community is impacted by a lack of future earning power—by as much as \$30.7 million a year (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009).

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) distributes a report each year on the completion and dropout rates in the state. This report is titled, *Secondary Completion and Dropouts in Texas Public Schools*. The annual reports are currently available on the TEA website for the 2005-2006, 2006-2007, 2007-2008, 2008-2009, and 2009-2010 academic years. The rates shown below in Table 1 indicate the percentage of students in Texas who dropped out of grades 9-12 in a specific cohort class such as the *graduating class of 2009*. The TEA's (2011) definition of a dropout has changed several times since 1987 when it was first defined. The current definition, adopted in 2003 by the Texas Legislature is

... a dropout is student who is enrolled in public schools in Grades 7-12, does not return to public school the following fall, is not expelled, and does not graduate, receive a GED, continue school outside the public school system, begin college, or die. (p. 18)

For the purposes of this study, the dropout data for African American, Hispanic, White, and economically disadvantaged students in grades 9-12 is reported.

Table 1

*Dropouts and Annual Dropout Rate in Texas Public Schools 2005 -2012, Grades 9 – 12*

School Year	African American	Hispanic	White	Economically Disadvantaged	Overall Annual Dropout Rate %
2005-2006	23.3%	56.6%	19.7%	47.9%	3.7
2006-2007	22.0%	57.6%	18.9%	46.4%	3.9
2007-2008	22.9%	57.8%	17.9%	46.5%	3.2
2008-2009	22.9%	58.1%	17.5%	39.2%	2.9
2009-2010	22.2%	59.0%	16.2%	39.4%	2.4
2010-2011	20.7%	60.5%	16.1%	58.6%	2.4
2011-2012	20.6%	60.3%	16.1%	61.0%	2.4

In the data reported above, the dropout rates in Texas for White students and economically disadvantaged students had a slight decrease in the last five years, while at the same time the dropout rate for African American students remained relatively unchanged and the dropout rate for Hispanic students increased. Obviously, we need to look for solutions to the dropout rate for all students and more specifically, look for ways to close gaps in dropout rates between White students and Hispanic students, African American students, and economically disadvantaged students.

It is unacceptable that high numbers of students of color and economically disadvantaged students are disengaging from school and making the decision to drop out. This is an educational equity issue according to Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, and Nolly

(2004) because we are seeing academic achievement gaps between traditionally marginalized students and their White peers with the former showing less academic achievement than the latter. Are youth of color and economically disadvantaged youth somehow finding themselves disenfranchised from school because the school fails to meet their needs? Or are these students faced with issues in their home lives that pull them away from their school? Or could there be so many factors at play that the students feel as they are trapped in quicksand—sinking—and going under? (Anderson & Larson, 2009).

### **Economic and Societal Impact of High School Dropouts**

The high school dropout rate in the United States is a serious issue for educators, schools, and communities. The U.S. Department of Education (2010) reported in *The Condition of Education*, “[i]n 2006-07, about three-quarters of the freshman class [in public high schools] graduated from high school on time with a regular diploma” (p. vii). The problem regarding graduation rates and dropouts is further illustrated by Rycik (2007) who stated in *Rethinking the Reform Agenda for Secondary Schools* that “ABC news recently reported that the U.S. Department of Education has found 31 percent of American students were dropping out or failing to graduate in the nation’s largest 100 public school systems” (p. 49). The dropout issue is serious because the students who did not graduate from high school will face challenges as adults they may not have faced had they earned a high school diploma (Kondracke, 2008). According to Kondracke (2008), high school dropouts “...represent \$320 billion in lost lifetime earning potential” (p. 1). Typically, dropouts do not have the skills necessary for higher paying jobs and

may be forced to access social services more frequently than their peers who graduated from high school.

In addition to loss of earning potential among high school dropouts, the United States is not fairing well in terms of the future earning power of our children and their ability to thrive in a global market. Hoyle and Collier (2006) stated, "... large numbers of urban dropouts remain a social tragedy in terms of our nation's influence in a global economic market and in our social systems to support the health and educational needs of our citizenry" (p. 73). When looking at the dropout rate in the United States, Princiotta and Reyna (2009) found the United States ranked 20 out of 28 other democracies. By 2010, the United States' ranking improved slightly to 18<sup>th</sup> in high school graduation rates, but continued to lag behind other nations in assuring a quality education to all citizens (Brown, 2010).

We all must consider the dire consequences of a large number of uneducated young people trying to enter the global workforce. This point was also stated in the report, *Achieving Graduation for All – A Governor's Guide to Dropout Prevention and Recovery* by Princiotta and Reyna (2009). These authors noted that students today are not only competing for jobs locally, but internationally as well. Many corporations are seeking low-skilled workers overseas due to lower labor costs. Students without a high school diploma will likely only have employment options available to them in the low-skills job market and if those jobs are being handled by people in other countries, there will be few opportunities for high school dropouts in the U.S. to find work locally. The report further stated most jobs created in the 2009 economic stimulus package required

some form of postsecondary education for which high school dropouts are ineligible (Princiotta & Reyna). The future presents a bleak picture for dropouts because the majority of jobs created in the United States in the next five years will likely require some form of postsecondary education. In addition, the U.S. Department of Education (2010) report, *The Condition of Education* concluded that "...in 2008 young adults with a bachelor's degree earned 29% more than adults with an associate's degree, 53% more than high school completers, and 96% more than young adults who did not earn a high school diploma" (p. 60). Clearly, the earning potential for someone without a high school diploma is limited.

A study by Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) found that, unlike their peers who graduate from high school, dropouts are more likely to have difficulty finding work, and therefore, are more dependent on various social services to meet their basic living needs. Furthermore, dropouts experience other consequences because they tend to live unhealthy lives; some end up in the legal system and prison, and some often end up as single parents raising children who also tend to drop out of high school (Bridgeland et al., 2006). This cycle of poverty can have a major impact on communities and may keep both the community and individuals from thriving.

High school dropouts, on average, earn \$9,200 less per year than high school graduate, and about \$1 million less over a lifetime than college graduates. Students who drop out of high school are often unable to support themselves; high school dropouts were over three times more likely than college graduates to be unemployed in 2004. They are twice as likely as high school graduates to slip into poverty from one year to the next. (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 2)

The Bridgeland et al. (2006) study further stated that high dropout rates impact our economic future because the United States will not have the educated workforce

necessary for future earning and spending power. An additional consequence of an uneducated workforce is the high cost associated with a large number of young people requiring public assistance (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

It cannot be overstated how critical it is for all educators, state, federal, and local governments, as well as all U.S. citizens, to face the dropout crisis head-on and find ways to remediate the problem. Princiotta and Reyna (2009) in *Achieving Graduation for All – A Governor’s Guide to Dropout Prevention and Recovery* stated “More broadly, the high school dropout problem short-circuits the American Dream—the idea that anyone can get ahead with sufficient hard work and sacrifice” (p. 10). The authors further indicated a quality education available to all citizens is part of ‘the dream’ because a quality education allows individuals the opportunities to be economically successful and contribute to society. However, we have an educational system that is failing a large number of students, those who drop out of school. Understanding who the dropouts are and why they are not finishing high school is part of the solution. The next two sections of this chapter examine both of these aspects of the dropout problem. The first section will focus on the conventional view and will be followed by the critical view. As a result of my research, I agree with the critical view.

### **Conventional Thought on the Cause of Dropouts**

#### **Overview of Why Students Drop Out of High School**

The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network and Communities in Schools (2007) published a report listing significant risk factors associated with school dropout for elementary, middle, and high school students. For the purposes of this study, the risk



factors associated with high school age students will be identified. These factors (originally compiled by Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007) are included below in Table 2. A checkmark by a risk factor indicates it was related to dropping out at the high school level in two or more studies (Hammond et. al, 2007).

Table 2 *Dropout Risk Factors for High School-Age Students (Hammond et al., 2007)*

<p><b><u>Individual Domain</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Has a learning disability</li> </ul> <p><b><u>Early Adult Responsibilities</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*High number of work hours ✓</li> <li>*Parenthood ✓</li> </ul>	<p><b><u>Family Domain</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Low socio-economic status</li> <li>*Low education level of the parents ✓</li> <li>*Large number of siblings</li> <li>*Not living with both natural parents ✓</li> <li>*Family disruption</li> <li>*High family mobility</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Social Attitudes, Values, &amp; Behaviors</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*High-risk peer group</li> <li>*High-risk social behavior</li> <li>*Highly socially active outside of school</li> </ul>	<p><b><u>Family Engagement/Commitment to Education</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Low education expectations</li> <li>*Sibling dropped out</li> <li>*Lack of conversations about school</li> <li>*Low contact with school</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>School Performance</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Low achievement ✓</li> <li>*Retention/overage for grade ✓</li> </ul>	
<p><b><u>School Engagement</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Poor attendance ✓</li> <li>*Low educational expectations ✓</li> <li>*Lack of effort</li> <li>*Low commitment to school ✓</li> <li>*No extracurricular participation ✓</li> </ul>	
<p><b><u>School Behavior</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Misbehavior ✓</li> <li>*Early aggression</li> </ul>	

The timing of when students choose to drop out of high school is also difficult to predict.

“National trends suggest that the risk of dropout increases throughout high school, with most students dropping out in the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grades” (Hammond et al., 2007, p. 20).

However, studies of specific populations have often found the opposite pattern.

Hammond et al. (2007) continue, “Studies conducted in various large urban districts such as Chicago, Baltimore and Philadelphia showed different percentages and sub-populations of students dropping out as early as 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade depending on the study” (p. 20).

In their report, Hammond et al. (2007) identified the factors that cause students to drop out as either *push* or *pull* factors:

There are two major categories of reasons: push factors, where students leave school due to something in the school environment, or pull factors, where students leave school because of events or circumstances outside of school (Jordon, McPartland, & Lara, 1999; Lehr et al., 2004). Push factors emanate from something about schools themselves, such as policies or the school’s climate or structure that alienate and/or frustrate students so they end up leaving before graduation. For example, some school policies that may exacerbate problems include giving failing grades after a certain number of absences, frequent use of suspensions and expulsions for misbehavior, and grade retention (Jordon et al., 1999). These practices may slowly alienate students, causing them to disengage and later drop out.

Pull factors are influences, events, and experiences outside of school that may pull a student’s interest away from school and result in detachment from school and eventual dropout. These could be individual, family, or community/peer factors. Students may become parents or find employment that doesn’t require a high school diploma. Some pull factors are peer-related, such as having friends who have dropped out; and some family-related, such as having to care for a family member or needing to get a job to contribute money to the family. When asked why they dropped out, dropouts have consistently reported more “push” than “pull” factors as the primary reason for leaving (Jordon et al., 1999; Lehr et al., 2004). (pp. 20-21)

Yet the report states “No single reason for dropping out emerged across all students in any of the studies. Nor did dropouts generally report just one reason for leaving before graduation” (Hammond et al., p. 21). Though it is important to identify the risk factors for dropping out of high school, finding the exact predictors is challenging (Hammond, et al.).

Not only was prediction of dropouts problematic, there was also no clear-cut group of factors that make the “best predictors.” Although grades or some measure of achievement, retention, absences, and family SES were found in many analyses to impact dropouts, the identification of these factors was not universal. There was no universal means of measuring factors and no agreement as to the grade or school levels at which factors were most important. (Hammond et al., p. 19)

The reasons students drop out of high school are varied and many, and the report finds “... that so many factors are interrelated, it is difficult to discern causality” (Hammond et al., p. 21).

As stated above, it is challenging to identify the exact cause behind the tipping point that causes a student to drop out of high school. After interviewing students to determine their reasons for dropping out of high school, Bridgeland et al. (2006) concluded:

There is no single reason why students drop out of high school. Respondents report different reasons: a lack of connection to the school... a perception that school is boring; feeling unmotivated; academic challenges; and the weight of real world events. (p. iii)

Among other reasons given by students participating in the Bridgeland et al., (2006) study were a past school retention, not being prepared for high school, not putting forth enough effort, and classes that were not interesting. How do educators and community members begin to tackle the problem? The question is as complex as is the

interrelatedness of the risk factors. The report by Hammond et al. (2007) states “These studies provide evidence that dropping out of school is not a single event but rather a long process of progressive disengagement from school that includes markers or warning signs along the path before dropout occurs” (p. 22).

The conventional reasons students become disengaged from school and ultimately make the decision to drop out can be categorized into the following: personal, family, economic, and educational. Each factor in and of itself may contribute to the reason a student decides to drop out of high school, but factors may also be interconnected. And one or more may combine to push a student to the decision to drop out. While some of these factors may surface as early as pre-school and elementary school, they may also surface in middle or high school. A brief explanation of some of the factors found in literature is described below.

### **Family and Personal Factors**

Family dynamics may often play a significant role in how well a student does in school and in life. Some family dynamics could be considered “pull” factors that may cause a student to drop out of high school. While not the only factor affecting a student’s decision to drop out of high school, a student’s family situation may be a predictor for dropping out of high school. Students who typically drop out of high school may come from low-income homes with parents who have a low level of education themselves (Okey & Cusick, 1995).

According to Okey and Cusick (1995), “...dropouts may learn how to think about and behave in and toward school from their families” (p. 245). Parents who

advocate for their children, are often involved in the school community, and have high expectations for their children's performance in school are more likely to raise children who finish high school (Delgado-Gaitan, 1988). Even if students feel connected to school, they may not have anyone in their home and family who knows how to effectively support their child in school and this can interfere with a student's desire to finish school. Drewry, Burge, and Driscoll (2010) found that "[i]n many cases students had the desire to complete school but did not have a relationship with any person outside of the school setting who was persistent with encouragement and knowledge..." (p. 515) to help them navigate the school system and stay in school. Students who are raised in poverty may often find themselves in homes where the parents and other family members are in "survival mode" trying to eke out a living to provide for basic necessities such as food and shelter. Often, the parents and their children are barely getting by financially and all their time and efforts, both mental and physical, are spent working and providing for life's basic necessities such as food, shelter, and rest.

### **Economic Factors and Students in the Workforce**

Students may choose to work while enrolled in high school because they desire to have a car, extra spending money, a cell phone, or other personal items for their own convenience or preference. However, there are many students who work to help support the family and may even be forced to drop out of school because their families are dependent on them to contribute to household expenses. A study by Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson (2005) examined the age a student entered the workforce and the implications on staying in school or electing to drop out. Students who joined the work

force in middle school or the freshman year of high school were more likely to drop out, as were students who were overage due to previously being retained in an earlier grade (Entwisle et al., 2005). However, the study showed that the later in high school, when students are age sixteen or older and if the student entered the workforce then, they were more likely to graduate from high school (Entwisle et al., 2005). Working while in high school may cause students to have less time to study and cause them to fall further behind in school, risking course failure (Entwisle et al., 2005). Course failure and low achievement may contribute to disengagement and cause a student to drop out prior to graduation.

### **Educational Factors**

Disengagement from school is one of the reasons a student makes the decision to drop out of high school, and often the disengagement begins long before the student chooses to leave high school (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007). Balfanz, Herzog, and Mac Iver (2007) define school disengagement as:

... a higher order factor composed of correlated sub-factors measuring different aspects of the process of detaching from school, disconnecting from its norms and expectations, reducing effort and involvement at school, and withdrawing from a commitment to school and to school completion. (p. 224)

The causes of disengagement are many and may include failing a course in middle or high school, frequent absences from school, behavior issues, subsequent suspensions from school, difficulty transitioning to high school, and retention in an earlier grade (Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007). Students who fail a course in middle school might begin to feel a loss of confidence in their ability to do well in school (Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990). Once this occurs, students may begin to lose

interest in school and be less engaged in the classroom, thereby beginning the cycle of poor school performance, behavior issues, and an inability to see themselves successfully completing high school. This cycle is seen more frequently in high-poverty neighborhoods and particularly after the transition from elementary to middle school—from one teacher and one classroom in elementary school to several classes and several teachers in the middle school (Balfanz et al., 2007). Students raised in high-poverty neighborhoods may face more challenges to a stable home and school life in that they frequently see more drug activity, are encouraged to take part in more risky behaviors, and may be required to help at home thereby missing school often (Balfanz et al., 2007). The implications for their educational achievement are obvious in that a low attendance rate causes a student to fall behind his or her school-going peers.

Many school systems tend to focus on the variables at work in a student's high school program at the time a student elects to drop out of high school. However, the variables that influence dropping out may begin much earlier. For example, a lack of preparedness for early childhood education, may impact a student's propensity to drop out of high school many years after they enter school for the first time. Many studies suggest that the predictors of dropping out can be seen as early as kindergarten (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hickman & Harvey, 2006; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999).

When a student enters kindergarten unprepared for school, it may take longer for them to learn to read and write and keep pace with the demands of the K-2 curriculum.

According to Rush and Vitale (1994), student attendance rates in kindergarten may be a predictor of dropping out of school. A variety of factors may prevent a kindergarten-age

student from attending school regularly such as illness or family issues, but low attendance may prevent the student from connecting with school emotionally and academically. Low attendance obviously impacts the student's ability to learn essential skills and concepts and may cause the student to fall further and further behind in school. A successful transition to school life from the early childhood years is likely critical to successful academic performance in later school years. Neild, Stoner-Eby, and Furstenberg (2008), stated "Recovery from a difficult transition into schooling is possible, but many students experience negative effects years later through retention in grade, assignment to low-track and remedial classes, and in some cases, dropping out" (p. 545).

Another predictor of a future dropout involves identification of those students not reading on grade level by third grade (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Hickman, Bartholomew, Mathwig, & Heinrich, 2008). Once a student begins to show signs that he or she is not meeting grade-level academic performance expectations, school personnel often determine that the best course of action is to retain the student at grade level to afford the student an opportunity to correct academic deficiencies before proceeding to the next grade. In actuality, retention may be one of the worst interventions for a student not meeting grade-level academic expectations because the retention may increase the risk of disengagement (Rush & Vitale, 1994) and serve as a foretelling of future school failure. According to Hickman et al. (2008) students retained in elementary school are likely to experience problems later in their school years such as behavior issues, poor academic performance, and low-test scores. Eventually these problems could lead to the



student dropping out of school. Holmes (1989) reiterates the point that retention does not benefit a student when he stated, "...On average, retained children are worse off than their promoted counterparts on both personal adjustment and academic outcomes" (p. 17). Other studies (see for example, Calderon, 1950; Coan, 1936; McLean, 1950) have reported that for several decades the rate of retention of Hispanic students was substantially greater than retention rates of their White peers. This is particularly germane for this study since EFHS has a predominately Hispanic population.

Very often students are labeled at-risk in early grades because of low achievement levels and are tracked into a sequence of low-level coursework in middle and high school, and in some cases, they are grouped with other students who are considered to be working below grade level (Lichtenstein & Zantal-Weiner, 1988). These same students may eventually find themselves labeled as "special education" students requiring intensive interventions in an effort to remediate their lack of academic achievement. An early study by Lichtenstein and Zantal-Weiner (1988), found that the number of students in special education who choose to drop out of high school exceeds that of the number of students in the regular school program who make a similar choice. Lack of successful transitions between elementary to middle school and middle school to high school can impede the connection a student feels to his or her school. Once this occurs, disengagement may begin.

### **Ethnicity and Dropouts**

Stearns and Glennie (2006) described in their study some reasons why African American students and Hispanic students tend to drop out of high school in North

Carolina. They found Hispanic students more than any other ethnic group tend to drop out of high school for family reasons and because the family relocates often. They called this mobility “residential instability” (p. 3). In addition to being highly mobile, Hispanic students are less likely than African American students to leave school because of behavior and discipline reasons and more likely to leave because they join the workforce (Stearns & Glennie). To this point, Behnke, Gonzalez, and Cox (2010) reported “Latino youth are more likely than any other ethnic group to drop out... because of the difficulty of their school work, personal problems (pregnancy or problems at home), the need to work...and peer pressure” (p. 1). Thompson and Gregory (2011) studied a group of 46 African American students as they transitioned to high school in an effort to identify what factors in school would predict not only a successful transition to high school but would keep the students engaged throughout their four years of high school. Thompson and Gregory chose to study this particular group of students because, “... African American students who are disproportionately represented in the ranks of adolescents who underachieve in academics, receive school discipline sanctions, and drop out of high school” (p. 3). Their findings indicate the importance of ensuring that students are engaged in classroom learning experiences from the 9<sup>th</sup> grade and feel a connection to school such that they want to do well because they recognize school is important to their future (Thompson & Gregory). Many of these students perceived discrimination in their early years of schooling and therefore, “...initiating a downward academic trajectory” (Thompson & Gregory, p. 6). Thompson and Gregory also found that the level of commitment to academic achievement in 9<sup>th</sup> grade by African American

students had a profound impact on their future success and commitment to completing high school. This finding has implications for educators in terms of engaging African American adolescents as they transition to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

### **A Critical View of the Causes of Dropouts**

#### **The Image of the Child**

A contrasting view of the term drop out is to think of it in terms of “school holding power” (Valencia, 2011, p. 23). From this view, it is the responsibility of our public schools to hold onto students and ensure they graduate from high school. If a student does not graduate from high school, educators must look within themselves for the reasons. Do the reasons include something that the educators and/or school system did not offer the student to ensure they stay in school? Was the student offered the best of each educator and the school system? Did the system work to fit the needs of the student or was the student expected to fit the system? Did educators have a particular stereotype about students and how they should be educated? Too often, it seems, our school systems focus on what is “wrong” with the students instead of looking internally at the system and the attitude of the educators as the reasons for students’ lack of success. Referring to the 1971 Mexican American Education Study by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Valencia stated (2011), “By placing the main onus on the school for keeping students in schools, the Commission advocated an anti-deficit thinking perspective” (p. 23).

Deficit thinking as defined by Valencia (2010) is “... tantamount to the process of ‘blaming the victim’. It is a model founded on imputation, not documentation” (p.

xiv). Deficit thinkers do not find blame with society or the school system for student failures, but rather see the students as having deficits that prevent them from being successful in school (Valencia). In contrast, proponents of anti-deficit thinking posit that the school systems, the curriculum, and the structures within, have considerable influence on the dropout rate seen among traditionally marginalized groups. Valencia suggested there are various theoretical perspectives that explain school failure among Latino students. A brief explanation of each follows.

One theoretical perspective is under the umbrella of communication processes. An example of this is that there may be cultural differences between a Latino student's home life and school life. For example, the language and way of interacting with others may differ.

Another perspective is that of "caste theory." Valencia (2010) states: Another explanation of school failure lay in 'caste theory' a model advanced by the late educational anthropologist John Ogbu (see e.g. Ogbu 1978, 1986, 1987, 1991, 1994). In his numerous writings, Ogbu classifies racial/ethnic minority groups in the United States as either "immigrant minorities" whose current social status is rooted in slavery (e.g. African Americans), conquest, (e.g. American Indians), or conquest and colonization (e.g. Mexican Americans; Puerto Ricans). Sometimes referring to these involuntary minorities as "caste-like," Ogbu (1991) asserts that members of these groups "resent the loss of their former freedom, and they perceive the social political and economic barriers against them as part of their underserved oppression. (p. 5)

Deficit thinkers espouse to caste theory because they see Latino student failure as being "...endogenously based" (Valencia, p. 5). The idea suggests that students cannot help they were born inferior and have biological deficits that prevent success in school. Caste theory sets forth the idea that because immigrant minorities may see themselves as oppressed; they may become overwhelmed and not able to handle the rigors of academic

life and therefore will not be successful in school (Valencia). As such, if an educator has this attitude and/or opinion about Latino students, they may see the students as being inferior and not able to fulfill all high school graduation requirements, thus blaming the student for the academic failures instead of themselves.

Another theoretical perspective is that of social reproduction and resistance as Valencia (2010) states, “this cluster is also referred to as ‘structural inequality’ or ‘systemic inequalities’ models” (p. 5). This perspective references an overall system of governmental policies and agencies that support schools and citizens who want to maintain the status quo and refuse to change to meet the needs of students of color and students from low-income homes. Students of color and students from low-income homes are expected to adapt to the way society and social systems are structured. Within this perspective there is an overall resistance to change and individuals who challenge the status quo or have difficulty fitting in may be seen as inferior.

Valencia (2010) argues that the theory of deficit thinking explains why students often fail in school and though it has been in existence for over a century, it is experiencing a revival. Characteristics of deficit thinking (Valencia) include victim blaming in which the deficit thinker blames a student’s lack of success in school on the student’s cognitive deficits and therefore the student is believed to be unable and unmotivated to learn. A second characteristic is that of oppression and can be observed in government and educational institutions that have put laws and practices in place to ensure that the traditionally marginalized student maintains an inferior position in school and society.

Valencia (2010) considers deficit thinking as a pseudoscience because of the negative bias of researchers who presented studies to explain why students of color were not successful in school. An example would be that of school segregation that occurred in the United States where for many years—and in some cases is still occurring today—Latino and African American students were placed in classes together and separated from their White counterparts (Valencia, 2010). Other examples of scientists' deficit thinking is that they believed that people of color suffered from bad genes, passed down through generations that cause an inability to learn (Valencia, 2010). They believed there were actual temporal differences between the brains of students of color and those of White people. This is similar to educability, another example of deficit thinking. Scientists believed that students of color could not be successful in school because unlike their White peers, they are incapable of learning and meeting the requirements of a high school diploma. The final characteristic of deficit thinking that Valencia (2010) describes is that of heterodoxy. He states:

Historically, the deficit-thinking model has rested on orthodoxy – reflecting the dominant, conventional scholarly and ideological climates of the time. Through an evolving discourse, heterodoxy has come to play a major role in the scholarly and ideological sphere in which deficit thinking has been situated. (p. 12)

One may ask at this point if we really have students, in this case Latinos, who are not successful in school because they are incapable of learning, or do we have schools and school systems that are not meeting the needs of all learners? Often, schools label certain students as “at-risk” for school failure. Valencia (2010) sets forth the belief that the term “at-risk” (p. 101) stems from a deficit mindset. School systems around the country, based on a mandate from federal government, are required to identify “at-risk”

students each year. This is done using a checklist with a list of “at-risk” criteria (Elementary and Secondary Education Act; title I, Part A; 1965). Schools designated as “Title I” (Elementary and Secondary Education Act; title I, Part A; 1965, p. 1) schools receive federal dollars designated as “...’targeted assistance” (Elementary and Secondary Education Act; title I, Part A; 1965, p. 1) in order to provide “...services [that] are provided to a select group of children – those identified as failing, or most at-risk of failing, to meet the State’s challenging content and student performance standards...” (Elementary and Secondary Education Act; title I, Part A; 1965, p. 1). Students who meet any one of the criteria are considered to be at-risk for failure. Criteria used to determine if a particular student is considered at-risk for failure include being economically disadvantaged, having a disability, being a migrant, not meeting grade level performance criteria, having attended a Headstart program, being neglected or abused, being homeless, and not being proficient in English (Elementary and Secondary Education Act; title I, Part A; 1965). The purpose for these criteria is to ensure that federal monies targeted for interventions for the “at-risk” students are spent on the targeted students. Valencia states (2010):

In sum, although the use of an inventory of indicators to identify at-risk students may have some utility in flagging pupils who have a probability of serious school problems, such as a procedure is misdirected because it masks the presence of systemic bases of academic failure such as schools with inferior resources and unqualified teachers. Furthermore, given that at-risk students are concentrated among pupils of color, from poverty households, single-parent families, and immigrant populations, the at-risk inventory approach has a strong tendency to stereotype. (p. 112)

Furthermore, Valencia argues that the very notion of identifying students and their families at-risk are caused by the greater society and school systems thus stemming

“...from an exogenous nature” (p. 125). Schools and school systems are not organized, financed, and staffed in such a way as to help the students.

Valencia makes the point here when he states:

In short, students are not at-risk for academic problems due to their alleged deficits. Rather, schools are organized and run in oppressive ways (e.g., inequalities in the distribution of teacher quality characteristics and inequities in the distribution of economic resources for schooling) that many students are placed at-risk for school failure. (p. 125)

In addition to Valencia’s research on deficit thinking, many other studies have addressed the drop out issue by looking at schools, school systems, and greater society as the culprits behind the causes of dropouts. These works do not blame the victim.

### **Victim Blaming**

In William Ryan’s (1976) book, *Blaming the Victim*, he writes about a shift from *victim-blammers* who were prejudiced and racist; which was witnessed quite openly in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century; to a shift to the time in the 1960s and 1970s where we began to see victim-blaming “...cloaked in kindness and concern, and bears all the trappings and statistical furbelows of scientism; it is obscured by a perfumed haze of humanitarianism” (p. 6). Ryan argues that during this period *victim-blammers* still saw, in this case African Americans, as being a product of a poverty-stricken living environment and know no other existence besides being poor and uneducated like those they grew up with. Programs such as compensatory education were created to help the victim rise out of their circumstance instead of restructuring schools and society so that the victim (person) could be successful. The victim was considered to be the problem, not the school or society. Ryan defines the typical *victim-blamer* as a person who is “...a middle class person who is doing reasonably well in a



material way; he has a good job, a good income, a good house, a good car. Basically he likes the social system pretty much the way it is..." (p. 27). Ryan goes on to state that the *victim blamer* he described has a dilemma because he understands there are people who live in poverty, have health problems, and are under-educated but the *victim blamer* does not want the social system to change the social system as it exists helps him maintain his lifestyle. Ryan suggests that the *victim-blamers* want to do something to help the victims but not wanting their lifestyle to change, they convince themselves that the victims are inferior and need to be fixed and healed. Ryan describes how the *blaming the victim* mentality plays out in schools by identifying the victims as having disabilities because they are not as successful in school as the typical middle class White student. The school sees students who have grown up in poverty as culturally deprived and the teachers therefore view them as underprepared for school. Ryan states, "...We are dealing, it would seem, not so much with culturally deprived children as with culturally deprived schools" (p. 61). Though Ryan's book was published in 1976 and focused primarily on the African American learner, more recent research indicates that his ideas are still seen in society and schools in the twenty-first century and with other students of color. Could it be that some of our teachers who work with traditionally marginalized students are unaware of their own prejudices and racist perceptions?

### **Racism and Prejudice in Schools**

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (1997) sought to define the term racism in based on the notion of racialized social systems. He states:

First, racism is defined as a set of ideas or beliefs. Second, those beliefs are regarded as having the potential to lead individuals to develop prejudices,

defined as “negative attitudes towards an entire group of people” [Schaefer 1990:53]. Finally, these prejudicial actions may induce individuals to real actions or discrimination against racial minorities. This conceptual framework, with minor modification, prevails in the social sciences. (p. 466)

Bonilla-Silva argues racism is a combination of prejudice and power, therefore the majority White population dominates every aspect of the society. If one agrees with this theory, then one can conclude that public schooling is impacted by racism since public schooling was created to educate the general population of students (i.e.: White students). This theory is supported by the Berlowitz and Durand (1977) case study that investigated the issues of dropouts. They argue that:

... the disproportionate number[s] of poor, minority and working class students [are] represented among the population of ‘school dropouts’ are, objectively the victims of an institutional syndrome of systemic exclusion referred to as ‘the student pushout’ phenomenon. (p. 1)

Berlowitz and Durand (1977) argue that minority students—primarily students of color—are discriminated against inside and outside of school. Additionally, because discrimination occurs in the school setting, minority students feel so estranged from the school environment that they choose to leave before high school graduation (Berlowitz & Durand).

### **Schools At-Risk vs. Students At-Risk**

Public education was created to educate *all* of the children of our nation. But as Michelle Fine (1991) states: “If public education is indeed accessible to all, how is it that most low income urban youths attending comprehensive high schools fail to graduate?” (p. 8). Fine spent a year studying a high-poverty comprehensive high school in New York that had an excessive drop out rate. She theorized that one of the reasons for the

high dropout rate was because the critical stakeholders—administrators, staff, students, and parents—did not speak out about the dysfunctions within the system because they were silenced by the very system. Minority students and students of color felt disenfranchised because teachers did not know how to teach them. Staff and administrators at the school perceived the students were lacking in knowledge and skills, saw the students as inferior because of their ethnicity and poor economic status, and did not know what to do about the challenges the students faced in their home lives – including inconsistencies in attendance (Fine). The school was a bureaucracy overburdened with large student enrollment, large class sizes, a challenging student population, a lack of parental involvement, and a lack of supplies and textbooks. Furthermore, the staff was predominately White, and was unable and/or unwilling to identify with the very students they were employed to serve and educate (Fine). Everyone in the school was silent about what they were witnessing—a dropout rate of over 70% (Fine). A pervasive culture of disempowerment existed in the school community (Fine). No one did anything to change the status quo. Moreover, the staff continued to go through the motions of attempting to educate those students who seemed to care about their education and knew how to be an ideal student. These *easy to teach* students complied with all the school rules, that is, they knew how to *do* school. However, the majority of students presented a challenge because they did not fit the teachers’ mental model of the *good* student and were silent about the inequities seen in much of their daily life at school. They did not believe anything would change if they spoke up about what they were experiencing every day and when their parents attempted

to challenge the system, they were silenced by administrators and teachers who quoted the rules of attendance and grading (Fine). These students were considered *at-risk* because they were not easy to teach. Fine states:

... in the face of contemporary exposés about adult literacy rates and extraordinary dropout figures, most still look at the individual child or family for the source of the problem.... No longer able to identify legally inscribed inequities or to claim that schools do not provide equal opportunity, educational despair pivots on 'those people' – their genes and pathologies. Despite equal opportunities they seem unable, uninterested, or unmotivated to learn. They and their children are called 'at-risk.' Public attention spotlights on them, obscuring the perverse structures, policies, and practices that place them 'at-risk.' (p. 26)

Fine (1991) spent many days at the high school in New York during the course of an academic year observing interactions in the attendance office, observing classroom instruction, and talking with teachers, students, and campus administrators. She personally witnessed many students being *discharged* from the school because they had missed too many days or were late too many times. The typical students being discharged were students of color and considered by the staff as students who were difficult to teach (Fine). Fine was told by staff – teachers, attendance clerks, and administrators – that they were following orders set by the school board on how to handle students who missed too many days of school and were obligated to discharge them. Fine states:

From inside the school, the discharge process appears to most, as inevitable, necessary, and nondisruptive. But would this process appear inevitable, necessary, and nondisruptive if 66 percent of white middle-class students were discharged from a ninth grade cohort? If almost one third of a school were disappeared between September and June? Or would the processes and the structures that support it, grow suspect for collusion in the perpetuation of social injustice? If silencing exports critique, discharge dispenses with bodies. (p. 69)

Fine (1991) describes later in her study how many of the students who were discharged from school had entered 9<sup>th</sup> grade already academically behind and many had previously been retained in a lower grade. The students became disengaged in school because they did not feel successful and many students just stopped coming to school and no one in the school appeared concerned and if they were concerned, they were silent and did nothing (Fine). The school was too large, with many teachers seeing "...165 different faces [a day] and established no real, sustained relationships with any one" (p. 158). Teachers were also not empowered to change anything about the way the school was structured, the curriculum, the textbooks, or to find better ways of doing their work (Fine). Fine questioned why nothing was done to stop the students from being discharged from the school or to recapture those students who had just stopped attending. She posited that the school was not meeting the students' needs in many different ways.

There are perhaps many schools in our nation that do not see themselves as organizations that should be flexible to meet students' needs. Instead many school systems expect all students to fit the school's program and abide by the school systems rules and regulations regardless of the fact that many students' need something different in order to be successful. Deschenes, Cuban, and Tyack (2003) state:

As we see it, these differences between the schools and students are based on a mismatch between the structure of schools and the social, cultural or economic backgrounds of students identified as problems. It is not a problem of individual or cultural deficit, as many educators have argued, but this mismatch has had very serious consequences for both individuals and groups of students. (p. 527)

There is a history in our country that students of color frequently fail in schools (Valencia, 2010). Students of color are often blamed because of their skin color, lifestyle, and are perceived to have learning deficiencies (Valencia, 2010). Many educators have blamed these students—the victims—instead of looking inward at themselves and/or or the schools in which they work (Ryan, 1976).

Schools continue to view students of color, students living in poverty, and students coming to us with gaps in their educational background as students at-risk of failure. Viewing a student as at-risk of failure labels the student and causes educators to, at times, automatically view the student as incapable of ever catching up with the easier to teach students and as always causing disruption to the school system (Valencia, 2010). The term *at-risk* carries with it a stigma in society. When many educators hear the term *at-risk* their prejudices cause them to lower expectations for the *at-risk* student (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2002). Wotherspoon and Schissel (2002) state:

These kinds of concerns have also led many commentators to emphasize the ways in which schools produce rather than ameliorate risk. School can be ‘risk – inducing phenomena’ in the cultural assumptions, classroom practices, and organizational and fiscal arrangements they adopt (Gordon & Yowell, 1994). Even the language of risk can serve as a euphemism for racism, sexism, and biases based on factors like class... thereby shifting attention away from more enduring problems. (p. 331)

How does this type of deficit thinking, blaming the victim, and seeing students at-risk connect with the high stakes testing movement across public school systems in the United States? What impact is the accountability movement having on students considered at-risk for school failure?

### **The Accountability Movement Putting Students At-risk**

The accountability movement in the United States and with it, the multitude of high stakes tests required of students in order to earn a diploma, is having a tremendous impact on many students considered at-risk for dropping out of school ((McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Heilig, 2008). While there is some truth to the fact that the accountability movement is on the surface raising the expectations that all students will and can succeed in school and graduate from high school, in reality many traditionally marginalized students are still struggling in school. According to McNeil, Coppola, Radigan and Heilig (2008), while the accountability movement in Texas became a model for national educational reform, many students were still failing in school and dropping out—specifically African American and Latino students. Their study looked at student data of 271,000 students in a large urban district and found that “...over a seven-year period...that the state’s high stakes accountability system has a direct impact on the severity of the dropout problem” (p. 2). In an effort for districts to show scores improved each year, many students became victims in the accountability game. McNeil et al. state:

The study carries great significance for national education policy because its findings show that disaggregation of student scores by race does not lead to greater equity, but in fact puts our most vulnerable youth, the poor, the English language learners, and African American and Latino children at-risk of being pushed out of their schools so the school ratings can show ‘measurable improvement.’ (p. 2)

McNeil et al. suggested that principals learned to play the accountability game so the scores looked good and showed improvement. As a result, principals began to look for ways to not have low performing students take the test (McNeil et al.). Some of the

unintended consequences of the high stakes testing movement included having students held back a grade so they would be exempt from having to take a test in which the school leaders believed the student would not pass (McNeil et al.). Principals were granted a waiver to work around the promotion rules and "...hold back as a 9<sup>th</sup> grader any student who had failed even one semester of a core 9<sup>th</sup> grade course" (McNeil et.al, 2008, p. 5). Some students never managed to make it out of 9<sup>th</sup> grade and as overage students, found themselves looking at large deficits in the required credits to graduate (McNeil et al.). The retained 9<sup>th</sup> graders became known as *dropbacks* and the classes they were assigned to ostensibly to shore up their skills and knowledge, became known as *dropback classes* with *dropback teachers* (McNeil et al.). The students were in classes with other students who were considered at-risk for not passing the high stakes test, thus creating a climate of failure (McNeil et al.). It may be that students were overwhelmed with a system that saw them as failures. As a result, many students may have given up and left school. If they stayed in school, the students were overage for the classes they were assigned to and saw a curriculum increasingly focused on test preparation as well as teachers who felt pressured to increase their scores instead of building relationships with students (McNeil et al.). McNeil et al. also suggested that teachers did not believe they had time to stop and reteach students who were having difficulty grasping a concept or skill but instead tried to make sure students knew how to pass the test.

Another unintended consequence of the accountability movement was the increase in a zero-tolerance attendance policy (McNeil et.al.). In order for a student to



earn credit in a course, they were required to attend school 90% of the time and if the students had significant absences, they may be required to make up the time or receive a ticket for truancy and have to attend court and receive a fine. In the McNeil et al. study, many students had to help care for families and work to support families thereby causing them to miss many days of school. Again, for the marginalized students living in poverty and often students of color, the truancy policy had a significant impact on their willingness to stay in school (McNeil et al.). Surely, the dilemma facing schools is undeniable. Do they concern themselves with raising test scores or with making sure all students achieve and graduate on time with their peers?

### **The Public in Public Schools**

Who is the public in public schools? Public schools are intended for all students in our nation no matter their skin color, economic background, family background, or educational needs. Yet our public schools are a microcosm of the greater society and as such are filled with individual adults who have their own prejudices, beliefs, and perceptions of who, what, and how we educate. Public schools are financially supported by the state because they are intended to educate all young people and are held accountable for an educated citizenry by the state and communities in which they exist (Fine, 1991). Schools are intended to be moral communities in which all learners are welcomed and have equal opportunities for a strong education as well as a safe place to engage in social discourse and to learn of other cultures and languages (Fine, 1991). Public schools are intended to be democratic institutions where all stakeholders have a voice and that voice is valued (Fine, 1991). Yet in reality, the public school system is

filled with private interests (Fine, 1991). Many of the people in government and others in the private sector of society have their own agendas for who, what, and how we should educate students in public schools. And very often their positions do not favor marginalized students (Fine, 1991). Fine (1991) states:

As long as educators (including principals) are forced to work in hierarchical, disempowering structures, they will engage in strategies to ‘manage’ their workloads and to negotiate the moral community of public schools. As long as the structures of public education are organized competitively and cater to those who are more affluent, more white, and more male, then parents and teachers will continue to engage in competitive and distracting struggles among themselves over limited resources. (p. 195)

Decisions have to be made between valuable sections in the high school master schedule whether to offer more sections of advanced courses or classes to remediate those students who are failing (McNeil et al.). The failing students are often from historically underserved groups who are already disenfranchised by the very system that was created to ensure their education (Fine, 1991). There are often not enough resources for all the needs and the accountability movement does not allow for culturally responsive teaching to engage marginalized learners (Gay, 2002, p. 106). Culturally responsive teaching is defined by Gay (2002) as “...using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (p. 106). Instead teachers, principals and entire school systems teach to the high stakes test and leave many students behind, and as a result, push out the students from the very system created to educate them. It seems that students of color and students living in poverty are often blamed for the failing of schools instead of the reverse—schools accepting responsibility for failing the students.

### **Comparing Conventional and Critical Views**

At this point, one may ask who is really to blame for dropouts? Can it be that the school systems and perhaps the U.S. populace as a whole are to blame? Do they view the student and/or family at fault? From this view, the student is considered inferior because he or she is not able to fit in to the regular school program and may be considered by teachers as a challenge and difficult to teach (Fine, 1991). The student and perhaps the student's family may be blamed for the lack of school preparedness. As mentioned above, this type of thinking may be considered deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010). The report published by The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network and Communities in Schools (Hammond et al., 2007) and mentioned earlier in this chapter, listed the drop out risk factors for high school age students and placed them in one of two categories, *Individual Domain* or *Family Domain*. Under the heading of *Individual Domain* the list included such factors as learning disability, being a parent, high-risk peer group, low-achievement, retention, poor achievement, lack of involvement in school, and misbehavior. Under the heading of *Family Domain*, factors such as poverty, low education level of the parents, family disruption, mobility, low educational expectations on the part of the parents, and little conversation about school in the home. No where in the list were included what role the school, school staff, and greater society played in causing students to be at-risk for dropping out of high school. What are schools and school systems doing to assist students who are experiencing difficulty in school and why are they experiencing difficulty? Could some of the reasons be attributed to the fact that many students who ultimately choose to dropout of school are surrounded by

members of society and more specifically, the school system, who do not sincerely believe that students of color—Hispanics, Latinos, and Blacks specifically—are capable of being successful in school? (Valencia, 2010). Very often students who are experiencing a lack of academic achievement are placed in classes with other students who are having difficulties (Ryan, 1976; Fine, 1991; McNeil et al., 2008). It may be very challenging for low-achieving students who find themselves each and every day of school surrounded by other low-achieving students to find a way out of the “low track” at school; they rarely have opportunities to learn from students in “regular” classes (Lichtenstein & Zantal-Weiner, 1988). Students in lower level courses may be exposed day after day to repetitive “skill and drill” and boring, irrelevant work thereby increasing their chances of becoming disengaged from school (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006). They may begin to see no meaning in their high school education and ultimately decide to drop out. But being in special education and low-level courses may not be the only issue related to educational experiences and dropouts. Building relationships with the adults in a school environment may be critical to student success, especially during transitions between elementary school to middle school and middle school to high school.

Many students in our school system today are bored and sit in classrooms in which the material is so vast that teachers move through the material at a rapid rate and students are not allowed opportunities to thoroughly explore concepts that may spark their interest (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006). When teachers show they value their students and truly care how well they do in school, students are less likely to drop out because they know someone cares that they graduate from high school and will do their best to

make sure graduation is a reality (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Dropouts often report that they did not have quality relationships with their teachers (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Croninger and Lee (2001) reported that the important role that educators and other adults have in assisting students through the difficult times they may face in school and in their home lives by providing "...emotional support, guidance, and assistance to adolescents..." (p. 552). They further state, "...teachers may bolster students' confidence and strengthen their ability to acquire a high school education..." (p. 552). Perhaps if schools were organized in a way and hired faculty which enabled students with challenging home lives and gaps in their educational achievement to experience success and a sense of belonging, more students would graduate from high school instead of choosing to escape from a system they which they feel disenfranchised. Perhaps if the curriculum was more relevant and engaging, we would truly help students achieve beyond what they or their families had hoped was possible. Instead, much of public education has not changed and continues to lose students prior to graduation. Fine (1991) states:

... urban, public, comprehensive high schools serving low-income students are more often organized in ways that offer relatively sparse educational expenditures and finances to children based on race/ethnicity, social class, and community; lend academic and social legitimacy to prevailing ideologies and persons of privilege which often deny and betray the historic and current lived experiences of these youth; seduce students away from the recognition of social inequity, power asymmetries, and social diversity... (p. 199)

Schools continue to focus on students that are easy to teach and do not challenge the status quo and discourage anyone who does (Fine). Once a student drops out, the system

does not have to deal with the challenges the student may bring to the system (Fine) and face its own ineffectiveness.

### **Dropout Prevention and Recovery**

The report by Hammond et al. (2007), *Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs*, mentioned above makes recommendations for how to begin to look for solutions when it states that while it is difficult to predict the exact cause behind a student choosing to drop out of high school, there are patterns in the data that may help educators as they identify possible prevention strategies. It is important to collect data on individual students over time to examine various factors that impact the desire to drop out (Hammond et al.). Hammond et al. (2007) further state the importance of looking at local data because, "...patterns vary across sub-groups, regions, and locations making it essential to collect local data to best predict who will drop out in a particular locality and identify the major contributing factors" (p. 22). In an effort to determine the contributing factors causing a student to drop out of high school and as mentioned above, Bridgeland et al., (2006) interviewed and surveyed young people who had dropped out of school. Not only were the students asked why they dropped out of school, they were also asked what might have helped them stay in school. The students' answers were part of the report *The Silent Epidemic - Perspectives of High School Dropouts* (Bridgeland et al., 2006) described earlier. Student survey results indicated the following:

While most dropouts blame themselves for failing to graduate, there are things they say schools can do to help them finish.

- Improve teaching and curricula to make school more relevant and engaging and enhance the connection between school and work.
- Improve instruction, and access to supports, for struggling students.
- Build a school climate that fosters academics.
- Ensure that students have a strong relationship with at least one adult in the school.
- Improve communication between parents and schools. (Bridgeland et al., 2006, pp. iv-v)

The report goes on to offer suggestions as to what schools and communities can do as proactive measures to help struggling students stay in school:

- Different schools for different students: Instead of a ‘one size fits all’ school, districts should develop options for students, including a curriculum that connects what they are learning in the classroom, with real life experiences and with work, smaller learning communities with more individualized instruction, and alternative schools that offer specialized programs to students at-risk of dropping out. Teachers should have high expectations for their students and try different approaches to motivate them to learn.
- Parent engagement strategies and individualized graduation plans.
- Early warning systems: Schools need to develop district-wide (or even state-wide) early warning systems to help them identify students at-risk of failing in school and to develop mechanisms that trigger, and ensure there

is follow through on, the appropriate support for students. One clear step relates to absenteeism....

- Additional supports and adult advocates. Schools need to provide a wide range of supplemental services or intensive assistance strategies for struggling students... peer counseling, mentoring, tutoring, double class periods, internships, service learning, summer school programs, and more... (Bridgeland et al., 2006, pp. v-vi)

Additional suggestions at the state and national level include a re-examination of the compulsory age requirements that would require students to stay in school until age 18, a more systemic and common approach to collecting and analyzing accurate dropout data, rewarding schools for improving not only test scores but graduation rates, and more research on effective programs and processes to prevent dropouts (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Study after study repeat similar themes as to which students drop out of high school, why they drop out, and prevention strategies (Behnke, Gonzalez, & Cox, 2010; Cunningham, 2007; Drewy, Burge, & Driscoll, 2010; Plank, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2005; Stearns & Glennie, 2006; Landis & Reschly, 2010; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). However, dropping out of school is not just a high school-level problem. As Logan (2010) states “...it is imperative that the issue of dropping out of high school be viewed as a K-12 issue” (p. 107). Dropping out of high school is not just a school system issue to solve alone. Schools and school systems can be transformed but must work with “...city and



community agencies... to facilitate educational, economic and social opportunities for [these] adolescents and young adults after graduation” (Fine, 1991, p. 205).

### **Conclusion**

This chapter examined literature on the subject of high school dropouts. Topics included the economic and societal impact of dropouts, characteristics of dropouts, and the causes and contributing factors of dropping out of high school. High school dropouts are not as marketable when seeking higher paying jobs as compared with their peers who graduate with a high school diploma. Therefore, dropouts may face a future of low-paying jobs and financial challenges. The literature reviewed included a wide range of reported reasons students drop out of high school. These include family and personal factors and economic pressure to find work instead of attend school. Educational reasons included such factors as grade level/course failure and resulting disengagement, and having a lack of proficiency in the English language in the home. Other educational causes behind the drop out dilemma focused on the belief that some teachers and administrators do not know how to properly intervene to prevent a student from dropping out of high school, nor do they know how to teach some students of color, immigrants, and/or those students they believe difficult to teach. For these reasons, some students become disengaged with school and drop out. A brief review of dropout prevention and recovery strategies was given and will be discussed further in Chapter IV.

Another topic presented was the concept of deficit thinking and the role it plays in creating challenges for students of color and immigrants in our public school systems.

Valencia (2010) argues that Latino students have not fared well in schools for a long time due to factors out of their control. He states in *Chicano School Failure and Success: Past, Present and Future* (2011) "...such school failure has been largely shaped in *educational inequality*, a form of oppression" (p. 1). Valencia argues that this oppression is evidenced by personal attitudes such as deficit thinking, institutional processes such as school segregation and/or lack of curriculum differentiation, and blaming the students because of a perception of their low academic achievement and the impact that low achievement has on a school or school systems overall achievement outcomes.

The dropout dilemma is very complex as seen in the above review of literature. There is no easy answer to the problem that impacts many students each year. There is no single predictor of who will decide to dropout of high school and at what age. However, this study is seeking answers to the problem in order to prevent even one student from dropping out of Bayou View ISD. The district believes even one dropout is one too many. As stated earlier, a high school dropout faces numerous challenges in terms of employability and a secure economic future. The community also suffers because dropouts do not contribute to a prosperous economy. The district and this researcher are seeking answers because as educators, we are responsible for ensuring that we prepare students for a bright, successful future when they leave our school system.

The next chapter will explain the methodology used in this study and will therefore begin to seek answers to the questions of which students at one of the BVISD's

high schools—Eagle Fork High School—chose to drop out of school between the years of 2007 and 2013, and why.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the methodology used in this study. The study served to create a profile of a dropout and the dropout prevention and recovery efforts at a suburban school district near a large urban area. The methods used in this study were primarily qualitative, but also included quantitative data collection procedures. The purpose of choosing to conduct a both a qualitative and quantitative study was to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the profile of a dropout at Eagle Fork High School (EFHS) and therefore to better inform efforts to prevent dropouts at the school and throughout the entire Bayou View Independent School District (BVISD). Quantitative data were collected to enhance my understanding of the overall picture of the dropouts and the drop out problem between the years of 2007 and 2010. The first section of this chapter describes the qualitative methods used in the study, and more specifically naturalistic inquiry and the case study approach, and the ways they guided part of the study. The second section of the chapter describes the quantitative methods used to determine relationships among dropout variables.

#### **Overview of Qualitative Research**

All the individuals involved in this study are, to put it simply, human beings experiencing life, and as such, have a story to tell. Their stories cannot be completely told by looking at quantitative data. It was important to hear the individuals' thoughts and stories related to the dropout problem facing EFHS. Quantitative data only tells part of the story. To complete the profile of the dropout from EFHS necessitated actually

meeting some of the very individuals who had experienced being a dropout. Not hearing their stories would have meant having an incomplete image of the EFHS dropout.

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) describe qualitative research when they state,

The word qualitative implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount intensity, or frequency. Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature or reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress *how* social experience is created and given meaning. In contrast, quantitative studies emphasize the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes. Proponents of such studies claim their work is done from within a value-free framework. (p. 8)

A qualitative approach to research allows for a richer description of the social world through the use of methods that may include narratives, the first person perspective, and life histories (Denzin & Lincoln 2000). A naturalistic approach to the research was used in order to comprehend the real problems experienced by dropouts. Erlandson et al. (1993) state that one of the assumptions made by naturalistic summary is that "... qualitative methods are generally preferred, primarily because they allow for thick data to be collected that demonstrate their interrelationship with their context" (p. 16). It is for this reason I chose to use this approach for this study. I needed to understand the participants' stories. In naturalistic inquiry, the researcher and participants have influence on each other as reality is constructed (Erlandson et al.). Other assumptions made by Erlandson et al. are relevant here because, as they argue, "While the researcher may use a variety of instruments to gather data, the primary research instrument is the researcher and the research design emanates from the research itself" (p. 16). When I sat

down to interview each of the participants in their office, in a conference room, on the steps of their apartment complex, or on a patio outside their front door, I was building relationships with them in a setting that was outside of a laboratory. As stated by Erlandson et al. “A natural setting is always preferred to a laboratory or controlled setting” (p. 16). Erlandson et al. continue:

The naturalistic researcher, realizing this, does not attempt to insulate himself or herself from the setting but seeks to establish relationships through which the mutual shaping of constructions is a collaborative exercise in which researcher and respondents voluntarily participate. (p. 26)

It is also critically important to honor the participants when writing about the research. As stated by Richardson (1992), “A continuing puzzle for me is how to do sociological research and how to write it so that the people who teach me about their lives are honored and empowered, even if they and I see their worlds differently” (p. 108). For this researcher to truly understand the EFHS dropouts, their lives, and their circumstances and reasons for choosing to drop out or stay in school, it was necessary to hear their stories as well as the stories of the adults who worked with them. The approach used to accomplish this was the case study approach.

### **Case Study**

The purpose of conducting a case study is such that the researcher has an interest in individuals and what can be learned from their particular case. To this point, Stake (2000) stated “As a form of research, case study is defined by interest in individual cases, not by methods of inquiry used” (p. 435). To begin a case study the researcher has to identify the case such as in this research project; the case is to study individuals who are associated with EFHS and the problem of dropouts. Stake stated that,

... the case may be simple or complex and may be made up of an individual or a group of individuals and the amount of time we spend on studying the case may be long or short but while we are engaged in the study, we are involved in the specific case. (p. 436)

Moreover, each case is its own system. Stake refers to a case study as a bounded system in that it has a “self” (p. 435) made up of many interacting parts. When immersed in studying a case, the researcher may face challenges in defining one specific part of the case because all of the aspects are interacting and integrated. Therefore, the researcher has to consider the whole, bounded system when examining the case. Stake identified three types of case studies. These include the intrinsic case study, the instrumental case study, and the collective case study and each has particular characteristics. The intrinsic case study is “... undertaken because, first and last, the researcher wants better understanding of the particular case” (Stake, p. 437). Stake further states,

The purpose is not to come to understand some abstract construct or generic phenomenon, such as literacy or teenage drug use or what a school principal does. The purpose is not theory building- although at other times the researcher may do just that. Study is undertaken because of an intrinsic interest in, for example, this particular child, clinic, conference, or curriculum. (p. 437)

The second type of case study Stake (2000) defines is an instrumental case study. This type is investigated because the researcher is trying to make sense of a larger issue. Stake suggests that there is very little difference between the intrinsic and instrumental case study. The researcher in the instrumental approach makes the choice, “... to advance understanding of that other interest. Because the researcher simultaneously has several interests”... (p. 437), rather than just one focus of interest.

Finally, the third type of case study as defined by Stake (2000) is the collective case study. This is the approach that I used for this study because I wanted to gain

insight into the dropout problem at EFHS. The collective case study as defined by Stake is one where the researcher uses insight from several individual case studies to formulate a theory about an issue.

It is the instrumental study extended to several cases. Individual cases in the collection may or may not be known in advance to manifest some common characteristic. They may be similar or dissimilar, redundancy and variety each important. They are chosen because it is believed that understanding them will lead to better understanding, perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases. (Stake, 2000, p. 437)

In order to find solutions to the dropout issues at EFHS, studying individuals who have knowledge of the problem helped to build a theory about what causes a student to drop out of high school before graduation. Knowing the causes may assist in finding solutions.

A case study begins with a set of questions around a theme or theory (Stake, 2000). The research questions set forth earlier in Chapter I were focused on understanding the characteristics of a high school dropout and the reasons these students make the decision to drop out of high school. By conducting interviews with individuals familiar with EFHS, the individuals were given an opportunity to express their thoughts on issues surrounding high school dropouts and thereby were telling their stories. Their individual stories formulated themes, which developed into theories about the causes.

### **Focus of the Research**

This study focuses on the dropouts from EFHS in an effort to create and define a profile of a dropout at the school. This study also examines the dropout prevention and recovery efforts at the school from 2007 to 2013. In so doing, I hope the findings from this study will inform current programmers and personnel at the school and district-wide



regarding the need to improve academic programs as well as dropout prevention and recovery efforts. As seen in the review of literature on dropouts, many school and district programs support institutionalized mechanisms that cause students to feel pushed out of the school system. Thus, rather than holding the students in the system until they graduate from high school, some students leave before graduation.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In qualitative research the researcher is part of the study rather than seeking to be separate and distant from what is being examined. The primary instrument for collecting data is the researcher herself (Isaac & Michael, 1995) and therefore the subject being examined is seen through the lens of the researcher's mental model and perceptions of the subject. The researcher cannot remove herself from the subject and as a result multiple realities are created through the examination. The results of the study are negotiations between the researcher and the human subjects who hold the data (Isaac & Michael, 1995). In the case study approach to qualitative research, the researcher has a viewpoint on the subject being studied—in this case—dropouts. The subjects of the research can then validate or dispel all or some of the former's viewpoint. Case study research is often the most preferred form of qualitative research as stated by Isaac and Michael (1995):

The preferred mode of reporting is the case study mode because it is the most adaptable to emergent multiple realities. It is also more adaptable to the nature of the researcher's particular viewpoint and to the manner in which this viewpoint interacts with those of the respondents and their respective values. It lends itself to the generation of so-called 'thick descriptions' that attempt to provide detailed reconstructions of the various multiple realities and which lay the foundation on which transferability is judged. (p. 220)

It is for this reason then that a case study approach was used in this research study. Interviewing student and adult participants who themselves had experienced the dropout dilemma allowed this researcher to confirm, dispel, or add to my own personal knowledge regarding dropouts.

### **Participants**

The participants included five students who had attended EFHS between 2007 and 2013 and five adult staff members who had worked at the school during the same time period and are currently employed at the school. Three of the students had dropped out of the school prior to graduation and two had not graduated with their peers because they had not passed the state exit exam in time for graduation. These two students ultimately passed the exam in July 2012 and therefore received their high school diplomas. Student participants were selected through purposeful sampling (Isaac & Michael, 1997) techniques from a list of students who had dropped out of EFHS during the 2012-2013 school year. With the list of dropouts and maps to each dropout's last known address, I drove around the district cold-calling on residences until I located the dropouts to interview. The adult participants were part of a critical case sampling (Isaac & Michael, 1997) because they were in a position at the school to have intimate knowledge and perceptions of the dropout issues at the EFHS campus.

### **Research Design and Data Collection**

As stated earlier, I served as the primary instrument for data collection for the qualitative portion of this study. Therefore, I conducted interviews with five adults who worked at EFHS between the years of 2007 and 2013, and five students who either

dropped out of school or were considered at-risk for dropping out of high school between the years of 2007 and 2013. Interview questions were based on the research—both conventional and critical—regarding the causes associated with dropping out of school. The interviews took place at EFHS in a private conference room, office, or at the home of the dropout. Participants were asked several open-ended questions, and gave permission to be recorded. If the student was a minor, parental permission was obtained prior to the interview. Following the interviews, all recordings were transcribed into text. Field notes were taken during the interviews and were not transcribed. I conducted a comparison of the recorded interview and the transcriptions to check for accuracy. Member checking occurred by asking participants to confirm the content of their interview by reading the transcription.

After a brief introduction and statement of the purpose of the study, the adults were asked the following, (a) How did you become a teacher? Tell me about your teaching career., (b) Did you work at the school between the years of 2007-2010?, (c) If yes, what was your role at this school? Describe your main duties., (d) Are you aware of any dropout prevention or recovery programs in place during the years of 2007-2010?, If so, what were they?, (e) Do you believe these programs were successful? Please explain why or why not?, (f) Can you explain an area of dropout recovery that is currently not being addressed by your campus?, (g) If you were to describe the typical dropout on your campus, how would you describe him or her?, (h) To you, what are the first indicators that a student is going to drop out before they actually drop out of high school?, (i) As a district, what do you think the district can do to better address the issue

of dropouts on this campus and be more effective in assisting with dropout recovery?, (j) Have you heard of a dropout prevention program from another school or district that you wish would be brought to your campus? If so, please explain what it is and why you think it would be a good program to implement., and (k) Are there any other comments you would like to add?

The same brief introduction and an explanation of the purpose of the study were given to the student participants, or in the case of the student being a minor, their parent(s) and the student. They were each asked the following questions: (a) What years did you attend EFHS?, (b) What grade levels did you attend while at the school?, (c) Did you like attending high school?, (d) What was your favorite part?, (e) Did you graduate from EFHS?, (f) (If student dropped out of high school) What grade were you in when you dropped out of high school?, (g) (If student dropped out of high school) What was the main reason you dropped out of high school? Any other reasons?, (h) (For each student) What does a typical dropout student look like at your campus? Describe this person., (i) What do you see usually going on with a student before they drop out?, (j) When a student is struggling, have you seen an adult talking or meeting with the student? If so, who usually talks with the student?, (k) Do you think talking to an adult in school helps the student stay in school? Why or why not?, (l) Did you or any of your friends ever participate in a dropout prevention program? If so, do you remember what it was called or what it was like? If so, do think it helped the struggling student?, (m) Is there something the adults at the school could do better to help when a student is considering dropping out? If yes, what do you think they could do?, (n) What do you

think the adults at the school could do better to get a student who has dropped out to return to school?, and (o) Are there any other comments you would like to add?

### **Data Analysis**

Since there was a large amount of information to analyze based on the transcribed interviews, the information was categorized through a coding method (Wiersma, 2000). There were themes that were seen in the literature reviewed above, and some of these same themes appeared when analyzing the interview transcripts. Additionally, I looked for patterns of thinking to emerge from the interviews and then began to code the information under categories (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Themes that developed at times differed when analyzing the adult and student interviews (Wiersma, 2000). Wiersma (2000) describes different types of codes such as teacher perceptions, patterns of academic issues, setting/context codes, or process codes such as a sequence of events. Ryan and Bernard (2000) state that in this process "... called 'open coding', the investigator identifies potential themes by pulling together real examples from the text" (p. 783).

### **Informed Consent**

I received permission to conduct this research study from the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University (see Appendix D) and the school district where EFHS is located prior to contacting the participants in this study. The participants were chosen because they had worked at EFHS between the years of 2007 and 2010 and were familiar with issues surrounding the drop out problem at the school. Students who had dropped out of EFHS between the years of 2007 and 2013 were identified through an

examination of the PEIMS report. Additionally, campus staff who I interviewed, identified and suggested graduates for me to contact for interviews. Due to the difficulty of locating dropouts who attended the school between 2007 and 2010, three of the former students who were interviewed included former EFHS students who had dropped out during the 2012-2013 school year. The other two students interviewed attended EFHS at some point during 2007 and 2010 but did not graduate with their peers because they had not successfully passed the state exit exam prior to graduation. These students had to retake the test during the summer after graduation and then received their diploma in July of 2012.

### **Trustworthiness**

In order for research to influence human knowledge on a subject, the study must have credibility (Erlandson et al., 1993). There are criteria that must be met in order for the results of a study to be deemed trustworthy. Erlandson et al. (1993) state:

... valid inquiry in any sphere... must demonstrate its true value, provide the basis for applying it, and allow for external judgments to be made about the consistency of its procedures and the neutrality of its findings or decisions. Guba and Lincoln have referred to these combined qualities as “trustworthiness,” ... (p. 29)

Credibility is established between the researcher and the participants through the co-created reality of the data gathered during the study. In any qualitative study, there will be multiple realities, or truths, but they will come together to form one hypothesis about the data (Erlandson et al.).

Trustworthiness may be established through techniques that provide a truth about the study. These techniques can be categorized through establishing credibility, using

processes that are transferable to other studies, developing consistency through dependability, and objectivity/neutrality (Erlandson et al., 1993). Table 3 illustrates a summarization of the criteria to establish trustworthiness in both conventional and naturalistic inquiry.

Table 3  
*Establishing Naturalistic Inquiry Trustworthiness: A Comparison of Conventional and Naturalistic Inquiry*

Criterion	Naturalistic Term	Naturalistic Technique
Truth value	Credibility	Prolonged engagement Persistent observation Referential adequacy Peer debriefing Member checks Reflexive journal
Applicability	Transferability	Thick description Purposeful sampling Reflexive journaling
Consistency	Dependability	Dependability audit Reflexive journal
Neutrality	Confirmability	Confirmability audit Reflexive journal

### **Prolonged Engagement**

Prolonged engagement assists the researcher in understanding the culture of a particular situation (Erlandson et al., 1993). As the researcher, I relied on prolonged engagement by interviewing each participant in the school setting or his or her home. Each participant appeared to be appreciative that I came to *his or her place* and this

helped to establish a trusting relationship. Each interview lasted 20-45 minutes. I have known each of the adult participants for several years and as such, I have developed a trusting relationship with them. It is important to note that in the naturalistic research setting, that the researcher is “the perceiver, the selector, the interpreter and the guard against distortions of bias and prejudice” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 134). Therefore, it is critical that the researcher be aware of his or her own personal biases and strive to listen and ask questions without judgment or the trust can be destroyed very quickly (Erlandson et al., 1993).

### **Triangulation**

Stake (2000) refers to triangulation as a set of procedures to reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation. He states, “Triangulation has been generally considered a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation” (p. 443). Wiersma (2000) states that triangulation involves multiple data sources in order to compare the information to “...determine whether or not there is corroboration. It is a search for convergence of the information on a common finding or concept” (p. 241). Furthermore, triangulation is a way to establish validity. For instance, Erlandson et al. (1993) state, “Methodological triangulation can take many forms, but it will usually be the combination of two or more different research strategies” (p. 138). In this study, the quantitative research seen later in this chapter was an additional research strategy used to triangulate.



## **Member Checking**

According to Erlandson et al. (1993), “Member checking provides for credibility by allowing members of stakeholding groups to test categories, interpretations, and conclusions” (p. 142). Member checking in naturalistic inquiry can be done in one of several ways according to Erlandson et al. These methods include:

1. Member checking may be conducted at the end of an interview by summarizing the data and allowing the respondent to immediately correct errors of fact or challenge interpretations.
2. Member checking may be conducted in interviews by verifying interpretations and data gathered in earlier interviews.
3. Member checking may be conducted in informal conversations with members of the organization.
4. Member checking may be conducted by furnishing copies of various parts of the inquiry report to various stakeholder groups and asking for a written or oral commentary on the contents.
5. Before submission of the final report, a member check should be conducted by furnishing entire copies of the study to a review panel of respondents and other persons in the setting being studied. (p. 142)

Member checking in this study was conducted by asking participants to read the transcripts of the interviews. In this way participants were given an opportunity to clarify earlier statements. Additionally, member checking was conducted by having informal conversations with the participants after the interviews had taken place.

## **Peer Debriefing**

Peer debriefing, a form of building credibility in data analysis, involves the researcher sharing information regarding the data with a peer or colleague in an effort to help test hypotheses, to understand emerging conclusions, and to have someone with whom to process information (Erlandson et al., 1993). Erlandson et al. (1993) state “The researcher thinks aloud and explores various hypotheses, and while the peer debriefer asks probing questions, plays devil’s advocate, and provides alternative explanation” (p. 140). The debriefer should be someone that is a true peer of the researcher and the peer debriefing can take place in an informal manner. Furthermore, peer debriefing may serve as a way to keep the researcher honest and allow for more hypotheses to emerge (Erlandson et al., 1993). After analyzing the interview transcripts and organizing the data into themes on large charts, I met with three of my professional colleagues and asked them to read the data. We discussed the themes and how I had categorized the data. They concurred with my categorization of the data into themes and sub-themes.

## **Thick Description**

The purpose of thick description in qualitative inquiry is to “... describe and to explain the essence of the experience and meaning to participants’ lives... Essentially this is what dancers do in interpreting a dance and most certainly what choreographers do in designing choreographic studies” (Janesick, 2000, p. 391). Researchers using thick description in their studies do not follow a “... step-by-step blueprint or mechanical formula” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 286). Kincheloe & McLaren (2000) further state:

As with any art form, hermeneutical analysis can be learned only in the Deweyan sense – by doing it. Researchers in the context practice the art of grappling with the text to be understood, telling its story in relation to its contextual dynamics and other texts first to themselves and then to a public audience. (p. 286)

Erlandson et al. (1993) state, “thick description provides for transferability by describing in multiple low-level abstractions the data base from which transferability judgments may be made by potential appliers” (p. 145). In conducting the interviews for this study, it was important for me to pay particular attention to the all aspects of the setting and environment where the interview was taking place so that I would be able to adequately describe the setting in the narrative of the Record of Study. Erlandson et al. confirm this when they state:

To be sure that one will have the data necessary to write the thick description it is important to be very aware of the context, using *all* of the senses. While in the context, it is important to stop and look, listen, smell and feel the surrounding and interactions. (p. 146)

In addition to the qualitative inquiry approach used in this study, this researcher believed it was important to use both forms of research methodology—qualitative and quantitative— because each methodology tells a story. Qualitative inquiry research design “... allows the researchers to be more spontaneous and flexible in exploring phenomena in their natural settings” (Rudestam & Newton, 2007, p. 32). Meaning is constructed by the researcher by being a part of the research and constructing meaning as a result of the study—in this case the interviews. Alternatively, quantitative approaches include a set of numerical data to construct meaning. Quantitative researchers tell the story through, “...mathematical models, statistical tables and graphs, and usually write about their research in impersonal, third person prose” (Denzin &

Lincoln, 2000, p. 10). For this study, the quantitative data may tell a story too, however for my purposes, these data support the qualitative data.

### **Overview of Quantitative Research**

The goal of the quantitative portion of this study was to use descriptive statistics to identify patterns in the statistical data of dropouts between the years of 2007 and 2013 at EFHS. The purpose of descriptive research is, “To describe systematically the facts and characteristics of a given population or area of interest, factually and accurately” (Isaac & Michael, 2000, p. 50). Moreover, as Johnson and Christensen (2004) suggest, the purpose is to describe, summarize, or make sense of a data set. The data set gathered is composed of the intervening variables that may have had an impact on the students’ decision to drop out of high school between the years of 2007 and 2013. The data set includes the intervening variables that describe academic history, discipline records, attendance, ethnicity, age, and grade classification at the time that each student dropped out. The data is presented in Chapter IV in table form showing the measures of central tendency, mean, and median.

### **Population and Sampling**

The population studied included students who either dropped out, or in the case of two students graduated from, Eagle Fork High School between the years of 2007 and 2013. There were eighty-one students who dropped out of the 2007-2008 cohort, forty-nine students who dropped out of the 2008-2009 cohort, sixty-two students who dropped out of the 2009-2010 cohort. There were twenty-eight students who dropped out of the 2010-2011 cohort, thirty-eight dropouts in the 2011-2012 cohort and twenty-three

dropouts in the 2012-2013 cohort. All dropout student data was gathered from the district's student information (PEIMS Reporting) system. The quantitative portion of this study includes the entire population that meet the criteria of being a dropout during the previously mentioned cohort years at Eagle Fork High School rather than a sample of students. When a student withdraws or is withdrawn from a public school in the state of Texas due to lack of attendance, the high school registrar must code the student in PEIMS with a leaver code. Students in this study were coded as dropouts because they each left the school system during the school year in which their cohort was enrolled, and did not return to school, graduate, receive a GED, begin college, die, or leave because of one of the thirteen non-dropout leaver reasons outlined by the Texas Education Agency. It should be noted that non-dropout leaver codes must be verified by the campus registrar, otherwise students will be coded as a dropout. The leaver reasons are included in Table 4 below.

Table 4

*Texas Education Agency Dropout Leaver Codes from the 2010-11 Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) Leaver Reason Codes (pp. 1-8)*

Code	Leaver Reason
88	Ordered by a court to attend a GED program and has not earned a GED certificate
89	Incarcerated in a state jail or federal penitentiary as an adult and as a person certified to stand trial as an adult
90	Graduated from another state under provisions of the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children
98	Other
82	Left for public or private school out of state
83	Withdrawn by district because student was not entitled to Enrollment in the district. The code is for a student who stops attending because he/she has moved.
85	Graduated outside Texas before entering a Texas public school, entered a Texas public school, and left again.
86	Completed a GED outside of Texas
87a	Enrolled in State Board of Education authorized Texas Tech University High School Diploma program or University of Texas – Austin High School Diploma program
66	Removed by Child Protective Services
78	Expelled for criminal behavior
81	Left Texas for Texas private school
24	Student withdrew from/left school to enter college and is working Towards an Associate's or Bachelor's degree
60	Student withdrew from/left school for home schooling
16	Returned to home country
01	Graduated from high school in the district

## **Consent and Confidentiality**

As stated earlier, I received permission to conduct this study from the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University (see Appendix D) and the school district where EFHS is located. Data were gathered from the district student information system—PEIMS. All student records were de-identified and secured on the researcher's home computer, which was password protected.

## **Data Analysis**

The analysis of data included a descriptive section seen in Chapter IV showing demographic data about the students as well as a historical examination of academic and discipline performance. Through the use of SPSS software, all data were entered to determine the frequency distribution for each school year between 2007 and 2010.

Johnson and Christensen (2004) state:

One of the most basic ways to describe the data values of a variable is to construct a frequency distribution. A frequency distribution is a systematic arrangement of data values in which the data are rank ordered and the frequencies of each unique data value are shown. (p. 436)

Several data sets are presented in Chapter IV that show the frequency distribution of the intervening variables comprised of academic, behavior, age, and ethnicity data for all students who dropped out of EFHS between the 2007 and 2010 school years.

## **Summary of Research Design**

This study is a qualitative inquiry that used both qualitative and quantitative research designs to provide for triangulation of the qualitative data. The purpose of using a qualitative approach with the support of quantitative data to complete the research was two-fold. First, I wanted to gather qualitative data through a naturalistic

and case study approach. Second, I wanted to use the quantitative data to support the qualitative aspects of the research—to provide validation and triangulation to what was discovered through the interviews with the adults and students. This study sought to create and define the profile of a dropout at Eagle Fork High School between the school years of 2007 and 2013. By using both qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis, a concurrent triangulation approach was applied. Creswell (2003) states:

The concurrent triangulation approach is probably the most familiar of the six major mixed methods models... It is selected as the model when a researcher uses two different methods in an attempt to confirm, cross-validate, or corroborate findings within a single study (Green et al., 1989; Morgan, 1998; Steckler, McLeroy, Goodman, Bird, & McCormick, 1992). This model generally uses separate quantitative and qualitative methods as a means to offset the weaknesses inherent within one method with the strengths of the other method. (p. 217)

Through analyses the data from both the interviews and the descriptive statistics, it was this researcher's hope that a more clear portrait of an EFHS dropout would reveal itself and thereby assist in providing insight to dropout preventive programming.



## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS AND RESULTS

#### **Introduction**

##### **Quantitative Data**

The purpose of this study was to create a profile of a dropout at Eagle Fork High School (EFHS) and the dropout prevention and recovery efforts in place to keep students in school. To accomplish this, dropouts who attended the school between the years of 2007 and 2013 were identified through the BVISD's student information system. Quantitative data about these students were gathered and is presented later in this chapter. In addition to the quantitative data, a case study approach was used to hear the stories of five students who had attended EFHS between the years of 2007 and 2013 and five adults who had worked at the school during the same time period. The adult staff members interviewed all worked with students and served in a role that had allowed them to have oversight or direct involvement in dropout prevention and/or recovery efforts (see Table 18). It was important to hear the stories of all participants as to why students drop out of high school and what can be done to hold students in school long enough to earn a high school diploma. In so doing, it was the hope of this researcher that hearing the stories would better inform school and community officials on what to do to prevent students from dropping out of high school. As an employee of the district—a former secondary principal and currently in a central office role—I had access to all student data.

## **Cohort Groups**

This section describes the quantitative data collected from the dropout cohorts groups from school years 2007-2008, 2008-2009, 2009-2010, 2010-2011, 2011-2012, and 2012-2013. Tables 5 through 17 will contain descriptive statistics about the demographic information, attendance history, age, and grade the students dropped out, reason for dropping out as indicated in PEIMS, course failure and retention history, student involvement in extra-curricular activities, and the discipline history on each dropout. There were a total of 81 dropouts from the 2008 cohort, 49 dropouts from the 2009 cohort and 62 dropouts from the 2010 cohort. There were 28 students who dropped out of the 2010-2011 cohort, 38 dropouts in the 2011-2012 cohort and 23 dropouts in the 2012-2013 cohort. These students dropped out of high school at some point in time before they were scheduled to graduate with their cohort group. The term cohort refers to the group of students who entered ninth grade together and were expected to graduate within four years of high school. The Texas Education Agency's (TEA) definition of a cohort group is "All students tracked from the beginning year through the fall after expected graduation, regardless of final status" (TEA, 2008, p. 8). According to the TEA's Academic Excellence Indicator System AEIS reports, there were 588 ninth graders in the fall of 2007, 610 in the fall of 2008, 627 in the fall of 2009, 627 in the fall of 2010 and 663 in the fall of 2011. Data on the number of ninth graders in 2012 was not available at the time of this study. The purpose of showing the quantitative data in this chapter is to give a basic statistical overview of who the EFHS dropouts were during

the years of 2007 and 2013 and to provide support for the qualitative case study data presented later in this chapter. The following tables present the quantitative data.

### **Ethnicity**

Table 5 shows the ethnic breakdown of the students in each cohort group. EFHS's majority student population is Hispanic so it is no surprise that the information in Table 5 indicates that most of the dropouts from the four cohort groups were Hispanic.

Table 5  
*Ethnicity of Dropouts*

Ethnicity	2008 Cohort	2009 Cohort	2010 Cohort	2011 Cohort	2012 Cohort	2013 Cohort
African-American	9	3	5	3	3	2
American Indian	1	0	0	0	1	0
Asian	1	1	0	1	0	1
Hispanic	66	43	55	20	31	17
White	4	2	2	3	3	3
Multiracial	No data	No data	No data	1	No data	No data
Total	81	49	62	28	38	23

### Age at Time of Dropping Out

Table 6 below shows the average age of dropouts in each cohort group. The data point to the fact that most of the students who dropped out were either 17 or 18 years of age at the time they dropped out of high school. If a student had never been retained in a previous grade and was making normal progress toward graduation within four years of entering high school, then a 17- or 18-year-old student would typically be in their senior year of high school. What is not seen in Table 6 below is what grade the students were in when they dropped out. This information is presented later in this section in Table 7.

Table 6  
*Age of Dropout*

Age	2008 Cohort	2009 Cohort	2010 Cohort	2011 Cohort	2012 Cohort	2013 Cohort
15	0	2	0	4	1	No data
16	4	6	0	7	3	3
17	16	7	14	9	17	7
18	39	17	42	6	13	12
19	17	12	6	2	3	1
20	3	5	0	No data	1	No data
22	2	0	0	No data	No data	No data
Total	81	49	62	28	38	23

## Grade at Time of Dropping Out

The data in Table 7 indicate a somewhat even distribution of the grades dropouts were in when they left high school. Students in the 2013 cohort had the fewest number of dropouts (23) with the most occurring at the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. The 2012 cohort had a fairly even distribution of dropouts in the 9<sup>th</sup> (10), 10<sup>th</sup> (13), and 11<sup>th</sup> (10) grades with only 5 dropouts occurring in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The 2009 cohort group, with the fewest total number of total dropouts (49), had a fairly even distribution in the number of dropouts by grade. The 2010 cohort had the greatest number of students who dropped out in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade (25) and the fewest who dropped out as seniors (3). Overall, the majority of dropouts left school during the 9<sup>th</sup> grade with the next highest frequency seen at the 11<sup>th</sup> grade.

Table 7  
*Grade of Dropout*

Grade	2008 Cohort	2009 Cohort	2010 Cohort	2011 Cohort	2012 Cohort	2013 Cohort
9 <sup>th</sup>	22	11	25	16	10	4
10 <sup>th</sup>	14	14	15	10	13	5
11 <sup>th</sup>	23	12	19	1	10	8
12 <sup>th</sup>	22	12	3	1	5	6
Total	81	49	62	28	38	23

## **Stated Reason for Withdrawing From School**

Table 8 below provides information as to the reason the students dropped out of high school. This reason is documented by the registrar at each high school campus and based on the list of reasons for withdrawal in the PEIMS data system. When a student is withdrawn from school either by choice or because they are no longer attending school or they cannot be located, the campus registrar has to indicate a reason for withdrawal in the PEIMS reporting system. The reasons are listed below in Table 8. The most common reason indicated in the PEIMS report for the dropouts in each cohort group was *Unknown* with 43 in the 2008 cohort, 39 in the 2009 cohort, and 45 in the 2010 cohort. When asked about these numbers, the staff member responsible for the PEIMS report at EFHS reported that the numbers indicated that the students disappeared—quit coming to school. Efforts to locate the students proved unsuccessful and according to the TEA’s PEIMS database, and could not be located in another public school in Texas or elsewhere. There were 16 students who withdrew themselves, or in the case of a minor, the parents withdrew them from school and indicated they were going to enroll in another public school in state. But these 16 students are considered dropouts because there is no record in the PEIMS database that the students enrolled in another school and the students could not be located. The 2008 PEIMS database shows 10 students in the 2008 cohort and six students in the 2009 cohort dropped out because they failed a state exam. There is no way to know for sure, but it could mean the students chose to withdraw because they failed the state exam required for graduation. In this table, the reason *Transfer to JJ* indicates the student was withdrawn because he or she was being

transferred to a discipline center because of a court-ordered disciplinary mandate due to criminal infractions and did not appear or enroll in the juvenile justice discipline center and were therefore considered dropouts. Data for the 2011, 2012, and 2013 cohorts were no longer available due to a change in dropout coding. All of the figures in Table 8 indicate that despite the reason indicated in the student withdrawal system in PEIMS, once the students withdrew from EFHS, they were never located again in another school and were therefore considered dropouts in the PEIMS database.

Table 8  
*Stated Reason for Dropping Out According to PEIMS Submission*

Reason	2008 Cohort	2009 Cohort	2010 Cohort
Failed exam	10	6	0
Pursued job	1	0	0
Enrolled in alt program	1	0	4
Incarcerated	2	0	2
Enrolled in other public	16	1	6
Enrolled outside of TX	2	1	1
Enrolled in private school	0	0	1
Unknown	43	39	45
Graduated	2	0	1
In-District Transfer	2	2	2
Transfer to JJ	2	0	0
Total	81	49	62

## **Repeating a Grade in High School**

Tables 9 and 10 show information regarding the number of dropouts in each cohort year that had repeated a grade in high school and what grade was repeated.

Unlike repeating a grade in elementary or middle school in which a repeating student must take all classes in the entire grade level for a second time, students who spend more than one year in any grade level in high school have not earned the required number of credits needed to be considered for the next grade level classification. It means the student may have failed to earn credit in one or more courses due to course failure or excessive absenteeism. Once the student earns enough credits to earn the next grade level classification, the student is then typically older—overage—as compared to most of the students at that grade level. For instance, a freshman student who does not earn enough credits to move to the sophomore grade classification will then find himself/herself sitting in some or all freshman classes with younger students. The literature reviewed in Chapter II contains information from studies (e.g., Hammond, Linton, Smink & Drew, 2007; Jordan, McPartland, & Lara, 1999; Lehr Johnson, Bremer, Cosio, & Thompson, 2004) that report retention and being an overage student as possible causes leading to a student dropping out of high school. Therefore it is significant to note that approximately half of each dropout cohort group had repeated one or more grades during their high school years prior to dropping out.



Table 9  
*Repeated a Grade in High School by Cohort*

Repeat	2008 Cohort	2009 Cohort	2010 Cohort	2011 Cohort	2012 Cohort	2013 Cohort
Yes	38	27	31	9	15	9
No	43	22	31	19	13	14
Total	81	49	62	28	28	23

Table 10  
*Grade Repeated in High School by Cohort*

Grade	2008 Cohort	2009 Cohort	2010 Cohort	2011 Cohort	2012 Cohort	2013 Cohort
9 <sup>th</sup>	27	16	19	7	6	2
10 <sup>th</sup>	6	5	7	2	3	4
11 <sup>th</sup>	4	2	1	0	2	3
12 <sup>th</sup>	1	1	0	0	0	0
Multiple grades	0	3	4	0	4	0
Total	38	27	31	9	15	9

## **Extra-Curricular Involvement**

One of the ways schools can hold students in school and prevent them from dropping out prior to graduation, as cited in the review of literature in Chapter II, is to have students feel connected to school through extra-curricular activities such as fine arts, athletics, and clubs. Tables 11 through 16 show the number of students from each cohort of dropouts who were in attendance enough to have their grades count for extra-curricular course enrollment over a five-year period. Tables 17 through 22 presented later in the chapter show the number of students from each cohort group in attendance over a five-year period. The numbers in those tables are greater than the numbers in the tables below showing extra-curricular participation. The reason for this is that some of the students in attendance for a semester of coursework may not have completed a particular semester and therefore do not show that they earned a credit in an extra-curricular class. BVISD high school students earn course credit by semester. For instance, there were 30 students in cohort 2007-2008 in attendance during the school year, yet only 20 of those students attended the full semester and had grades in the extra-curricular courses, and therefore, were part of the statistical analysis.

Table 11  
*Cohort 2008 History of Involvement in Extra-Curricular in Middle and High School*

Academic Year	Number of Students	Semester 1	Semester 2
2007-08	20	8 (40%)	3 (15%)
2006-07	38	14 (37%)	9 (27%)
2005-06	55	14 (25%)	7 (13%)
2004-05	54	10 (18%)	7 (13%)
2003-04	52	12 (23%)	9 (17%)
Total	219	58 (26%)	35 (16%)

Table 12  
*Cohort 2009 History in Involvement in Extra-Curricular Activities in Middle and High School*

Academic Year	Number of Students	Semester 1	Semester 2
2008-09	10	3 (3%)	3 (3%)
2007-08	18	4 (22%)	4 (22%)
2006-07	30	11 (36%)	10 (33%)
2005-06	42	20 (48%)	22 (52%)
2004-05	36	12 (33%)	14 (39%)
Total	136	50 (37%)	53 (39%)

Table 13

*Cohort 2010 History of Involvement in Extra-Curricular Activities in Middle and High School*

Academic Year	Number of Students	Semester 1	Semester 2
2009-10	6	1 (16%)	0
2008-09	17	7 (41%)	2 (12%)
2007-08	33	4 (12%)	3 (9%)
2006-07	29	7 (24%)	4 (14%)
2005-06	37	18 (48%)	23 (62%)
Total	122	37 (30%)	32 (26%)

Table 14

*Cohort 2011 History in Involvement in Extra-Curricular Activities in Middle and High School*

Academic Year	Number of Students	Semester 1	Semester 2
2010-11	2	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
2009-10	3	2 (66.6%)	2 (66.6%)
2008-09	12	2 (16.7%)	3 (25.0%)
2007-08	17	8 (47.1%)	5 (29.4%)
2006-07	ND	ND	ND
Total			

ND – No Data Available

Table 15

*Cohort 2012 History in Involvement in Extra-Curricular Activities in Middle and High School*

Academic Year	Number of Students	Semester 1	Semester 2
2011-12	11	1 (9%)	1 (9%)
2010-11	24	7 (29%)	6 (25%)
2009-10	31	8 (26%)	7 (23%)
2008-09	35	14 (40%)	13 (37%)
2007-08	ND	ND	ND
Total	101	30 (30%)	27 (27%)

ND – No Data Available

Table 16

*Cohort 2013 History in Involvement in Extra-Curricular Activities in Middle and High School*

Academic Year	Number of Students	Semester 1	Semester 2
2012-13	11	1 (9%)	0 (0%)
2011-12	21	5 (24%)	2 (10%)
2010-11	22	5 (23%)	4 (18%)
2009-10	20	10 (50%)	11 (55%)
2008-09	ND	ND	ND
Total	74	21 (28%)	17 (23%)

ND – No Data Available

Overall, the level of participation by the dropout cohort groups in extra-curricular classes was not significant. Of particular note, it was very difficult to obtain complete data on students' extra-curricular participation.

### **Attendance History**

The next set of tables show the attendance history of each of the cohort groups. A brief explanation of each table will be presented before each table. The purpose of looking at the attendance history of each cohort group was to determine if the dropouts had a history of high absenteeism, as this was one of the reasons cited in the literature for students dropping out of high school. As the data below show, the dropouts did in fact have a high number of absences. The TEA and Texas Education Code clearly state how important school attendance is in terms of students earning credit for course work as seen in this statement on the TEA website:

Texas school districts are required to provide at least 180 days of instruction (Section 25.081, TEC). However, some districts have a waiver from the Commissioner of Education allowing them to substitute a few of those days for teacher professional development days. To receive credit for class, a student is required to attend school for at least 90 percent of the days the class is offered Section 25.092, TEC. Students with excessive absences may restore credit as provided by local policy. (Section 25.092, para. 1)

In other words, students in the state of Texas, who attend schools with a school year of 180 days, must not have more than eighteen absences if they are to earn credit for a class. Local BVISD policy does allow for students to make up time for excessive absences in order to earn credit for coursework. This might include such things as volunteer work and community service. Every campus in the district has an attendance

committee that determines when, if, and what students have to do in order to restore credit due to excessive absences.

Table 17 below shows the attendance history for the dropouts in the 2008 cohort. This cohort group had 81 students who dropped out of high school at some point between the time they entered ninth grade at EFHS and the time their cohort group graduated in May of 2008. Thirty of the dropouts were still enrolled in school as of the fall of their senior year and 51 had already dropped out. Of the 30 still enrolled in school during 2007-2008, the average number of days they missed school was 14. During the 2006-2007 school year, there were 53 dropouts still enrolled and of those students, they missed an average of 18 days (actual number was 17.8679). One can see that the attendance history of this cohort groups indicates a pattern of excessive absences over a five-year period.

Table 17  
*Cohort 2008 Attendance History*

		Statistics				
		yr0708	yr0607	yr0506	yr0405	yr0304
N	Valid	30	53	65	56	32
	Missing	51	28	16	25	49
Mean		14.3667	17.8679	22.1692	25.6071	23.5313
Median		10.5000	15.0000	14.0000	18.0000	16.0000
Mode		.00 <sup>a</sup>	4.00 <sup>a</sup>	7.00	4.00	2.00 <sup>a</sup>

a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

Table 18 below shows the attendance history of the 2009 cohort. Of the 49 dropouts in this cohort group there were 23 students still in attendance and those students had an average of 26 absences (actual number was 25.57). This cohort group also had a history of excessive absences particularly during the 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 school years.

Table 18  
*Cohort 2009 Attendance History*

		Statistics				
		yr0809	yr0708	yr0607	yr0506	yr0405
N	Valid	23	26	36	41	34
	Missing	26	23	13	8	15
Mean		25.57	22.3462	17.61	9.66	7.53
Median		21.00	20.0000	14.50	7.00	6.50
Mode		10	11.00 <sup>a</sup>	13	3	0

a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown.

Table 19 below shows the attendance data of the 2010 cohort group. There were 62 dropouts in this cohort, and this cohort similar to the other two cohorts above, had a history of excessive absences with average of 16 or more absences recorded each year.



Table 19  
*Cohort 2010 Attendance History*

		Statistics				
		yr0910	yr0809	yr0708	yr0607	yr0506
N	Valid	13	33	47	45	38
	Missing	49	29	15	17	24
Mean		16.77	18.24	17.79	22.24	21.18
Median		15.00	10.00	15.00	18.00	10.00
Mode		1 <sup>a</sup>	5	1	28	5 <sup>a</sup>

a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown.

Tables 20 through 22 show a similar history of excessive absences.

Table 20  
*Cohort 2011 Attendance History*

		Statistics				
		Yr1011	Yr0910	Yr0809	Yr0708	Yr0607
N	Valid	2	ND	ND	ND	ND
	Missing	26	ND	ND	ND	ND
Mean		16.5	ND	ND	ND	ND
Median		21	ND	ND	ND	ND
Mode		6.00a	ND	ND	ND	ND

a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

ND = No Data Available

Table 21  
*Cohort 2012 Attendance History*

		Statistics				
		Yr1112	Yr1011	Yr1011	Yr0910	Yr0809
N	Valid	13	26	ND	ND	ND
	Missing	25	12	ND	ND	ND
Mean		42.4615	33.0000	ND	ND	ND
Median		27	22.5	ND	ND	ND
Mode		20	20.00a	ND	ND	ND

a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

ND = No Data Available

Table 22  
*Cohort 2013 Attendance History*

		Statistics				
		Yr1213	Yr1112	Yr1011	Yr0910	Yr0809
N	Valid	11	21	16	ND	ND
	Missing	12	2	7	ND	ND
Mean		50.1818	47.9524	34.8125	ND	ND
Median		42	41	27	ND	ND
Mode		8.00a	14.00a	26	ND	ND

a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

ND = No Data Available

Table 23 below shows the discipline history of each cohort, 2008 through 2013, and the types of incidents associated with disciplinary actions in BVISD.

Table 23  
*Discipline History*

Type of Incident	Number by Cohort					2013
	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	
Violation of Code of Conduct	77	60	41	28	55	26
Violation of Code of Conduct at AEP	4	2	6	0	0	0
Truancy	13	7	3	2	3	1
Possession of Controlled Substance	8	1	3	0	5	2
Possession of Alcohol	0	0	1	0	2	0
Possession of Tobacco	0	0	0	0	0	1
Fighting/Mutual Combat	1	3	1	1	4	1
Permanent Removal by a Teacher from Class	15	0	0	0	0	0

Discipline data indicate that at least half of each cohort group had discipline infractions over a four-year period. The majority of discipline infractions were coded as a violation of the BVISD Code of Conduct which may include but is not limited to disruptive behavior, violation of dress code, insubordination, and other offenses which do not require removal from the school but may have resulted in the number of in-school or out-of school suspensions.

### **Summary of Quantitative Data**

There were 192 students who dropped out of EFHS over a three-year period between 2007 and 2010. Of those students, one hundred sixty-four (85%) were Hispanic, seventeen were African American (9%), eight were White (4%), two were Asian (.04%), and one was Native American. These data are not surprising since most of the students who attend EFHS are of Hispanic origin. The majority (51%) of the students dropped out of school at age eighteen, with 19% at age seventeen, and 18% dropping out at age nineteen. Most of the students, 30%, dropped out of school in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, followed closely with 28% dropping out in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, 22% in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, and 19% dropping out in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The data indicate that most students who dropped out were age seventeen or eighteen and most were in their 9<sup>th</sup> grade year of school meaning they were overage for their grade level.

Of the stated reasons for withdrawing from school, one hundred twenty-seven (66%) were marked *unknown*, indicating the students' whereabouts were unknown and they had not enrolled in another public school. Twenty-three (12%) of the students indicated they were withdrawing to attend another public school but were never found

enrolled in another public school and were therefore considered a drop out. When combining those two groups, one can conclude that 78% of the dropouts over a three-year period were never located in another public school and no one from the BVISD could locate these students.

Exactly 50% of the one-hundred-ninety-two dropouts repeated a grade in high school which means they did not earn enough credits during a school year to advance to the next grade level and sixty-two (64%) of those students repeated the freshman year. The percentage of dropouts that were at one time involved in extra-curricular classes was mixed but most of the students earned credits for extra-curricular classes over a five-year period. Attendance rates indicate excessive absences among all three-cohort groups of dropouts. Over a five-year period the 2007-2008-cohort group had an average of 20.69 absences, the 2008-2009-cohort group had an average of 16.54 absences and the 2009-2010-cohort group had an average of 19.24 absences.

Discipline data indicated that a majority of the dropouts had numerous discipline offenses over a four-year period. The majority of offenses were a violation of the district's Code of Conduct and of the students with discipline offenses, they spent many days either assigned to in-school or out-of school suspensions. Few students were assigned to the district discipline alternative education placement or the juvenile justice educational placement.

In conclusion, the majority of dropouts were Hispanic, had excessive absences, dropped out when they were either seventeen or eighteen years old, dropped out in either 9<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> grade, exactly half of the one-hundred-ninety two dropouts repeated a grade in

high school, and 64% of those students repeated the freshman year of high school. Once the students were withdrawn from school, 78% of those students were never located again.

### **Qualitative Data**

As stated earlier, I had face-to-face semi-structured interviews with five adults and five students for this study. The interviews took place between June 2012 and June 2013. Each adult participant was asked the same set of twelve questions and each student participant was asked the same sixteen questions (see Appendix C). All interviews were recorded and transcribed into text. Handwritten notes were taken during the interviews but the data presented in this chapter is, for the most part, taken from the transcriptions. Once the interviews were transcribed, the data were coded into themes and sub-themes. The next section of this chapter describes the students and themes seen in the data.

### **The Student Participants and Their Stories**

The literature review in Chapter II exposed numerous reasons that cause a student to drop out of high school. Some reasons were of a conventional view such as, family issues, economic hardship, low school achievement, school retention, discipline issues, and more. Opposing views to the conventional view looked at the structures, policies, procedures, practices, and prejudices that may cause the student to be pushed out of school prior to graduation. It is through this lens that this researcher analyzed the interviews to look for patterns among the reasons given for a student dropping out of high school.

Each of these young people had an important story to tell and seemed genuinely pleased to have the opportunity to speak about their lives. Interestingly, the two the students interviewed who had the least to say were the two students, out of the five interviewed, who had earned the high school diploma at the time of the interview. These two students had not actually graduated with their peers in May of their senior year because they had not passed one or more of the required Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) exit exams. They had to retake the exams during the summer after graduation and graduated in August after their cohort peers at the district's summer graduation ceremony. I interviewed these two students at EFHS while they were attending a summer *bridge program*—a partnership between a local community college and the school district. Thirty-seven students were taking community college courses at the EFHS campus being taught by college staff. The district provided door-to-door transportation for these students. The three students interviewed who were actual dropouts at the time of the interview appeared very eager to tell their stories. Their words and their eyes told very compelling stories. It was a challenge to find these three dropouts to interview. I had a very difficult time locating students who had dropped out of EFHS during the years of 2007 to 2010 so I used the list of seventy-nine EFHS dropouts from the 2012-2013 school year (current) and spent three weekends in April of 2013 driving around the school district with Google Maps in my hand, knocking on doors of the dropouts' last known addresses. Many on list of dropouts were no longer living at the address I had and no one knew where they had moved. I talked to neighbors, apartment managers, and school personnel. It was a celebration to find the

three dropouts that I interviewed. I was truly honored to meet them and their words and wisdom provided much insight into their lives and what led to the decision to dropout of high school. The students I interviewed are listed below in Table 24. Their names have been changed to protect their privacy.

Table 24  
*Student Participants' Age, Ethnicity, and Gender Distribution*

Participant	Ethnicity	Gender	Current Age	Age at Time of Drop Out	Family Status	Living Arrangement
Teresa	African American	Female	18	18	Single Parent	On Own
Daniel	Hispanic	Male	19	18	Two Parents	At Home
Jessica	Hispanic	Female	16	16	Single Parent	At Home
Rachel	Hispanic	Female	19	Graduated	Single Parent	At Home
Jose	Hispanic	Male	19	Graduated	Two Parents	At Home

Themes that emerged from the student interview transcripts were school disengagement, family and personal problems, and school life. School disengagement included sub-themes of disconnection from school, student perceptions of a lack of support from school personnel, and students' perceptions of a dropout. The theme of family and personal problems includes sub-themes of financial hardships and personal issues related to life circumstances and/or peers. The school life theme includes sub-



themes related to the students' feelings about school and what the school can do to prevent keep students from dropping out of school.

## **Students**

### **Teresa**

Teresa is an 18-year-old African American female who dropped out of school in November of her senior year in high school. Teresa attended elementary, middle, and high school in the BVISD. She stated that she loved high school but decided to drop out because of all "all the drama." Teresa was living on her own in an apartment and was working full time at a local pizza restaurant. She told me her managers at work were very supportive of her getting her high school diploma. When asked if she enjoyed high school, Teresa stated:

I did. I mean, it wasn't exactly the most fun thing to do because of the work, of course, but I think that's with anybody. The drama kind of killed it for me a little bit. I didn't exactly enjoy it because of the drama that was outside of the classes. Even sometimes they were inside the classes. So it was okay. I did enjoy high school, but then it started, stuff started happening although it shouldn't have, but it was fine.

Teresa is very bright, quick-witted, fast-talking, and generally has a huge smile on her face. She appears at first impression to be very mature for her age because she is living on her own and working full-time.

### **Daniel**

Daniel is a nineteen-year-old Hispanic male and is living at home with both his parents and two younger siblings. One of his siblings is a ninth grade brother attending EFHS and the other is his elementary-age sister. I found David's home one Saturday while looking for dropouts to interview. I walked to the small apartment complex with

only six apartments in a shady lot one block from one of the busiest streets in the district. There were no numbers on the doors so I did not know which apartment was Daniel's. Fortunately, I was standing there only briefly when a young man with a backpack on his back approached and asked if I needed help. I told him I was looking for Daniel. He stated he was his brother and that Daniel should be home any moment. I told the brother why I was looking for Daniel and left my card asking Daniel to call me if he would like to talk to me. I left and not five minutes later, Daniel called and I quickly returned to the apartment. We sat outside under a shade tree and began the interview. Daniel has extremely nice manners and looks people in the eye when he talks to them. Daniel went to work fulltime at a restaurant at the end of the first semester of his senior year to help with finances at home. David stated in our interview:

I had to help my parents with the situation we had, economic situation. My dad wasn't working and my mom – I mean; she's a waitress so that would only go for the food so we had to get the rent and bills paid.

David stated he liked high school and especially his teachers because of the way they taught the students.

### **Jessica**

Jessica is a sixteen-year-old Hispanic female who quit going to school during her first semester of her second year as a freshman. Jessica lives in a sparse apartment with little furniture with her mother, her mother's elderly father, her teenage brother who attends middle school in the district, and younger brother who is a toddler. There is another sibling who is a baby and I learned was at that time in the hospital. Jessica's father lives in another part of the city. The day I interviewed Jessica, I had knocked on

the apartment door and her mother answered the door. The toddler was at her feet with jelly all over his face. I told the mother why I was there and I wanted permission to interview Jessica because she was a drop out and I was trying to learn about why students drop out of high school. Her mother went inside and brought Jessica to the door. Jessica agreed to the interview so we all went into the apartment to complete the paperwork giving me permission to conduct the interview. It was during this time that Jessica's mother informed me that I was lucky to catch them at home because her baby was in the hospital and they had been there all night with her. They had just come home to get a bite to eat and were returning to the hospital shortly. Jessica's mother asked if I could get Jessica back in school and I told her I would try. Once the paperwork was complete, Jessica and I went outside to sit on the rickety stairs leading to the second floor of the apartment complex and began the interview. Jessica told me she had attended elementary school in Kentucky and found school easy during those years. She returned to BVISD when in eighth grade. She stated:

... those years, they were like nothing. They were like water like I could pass through them easily. Yeah, school was really easy for me. I came over here in eighth grade. I started my eighth grade year over here, but my middle school years were easy like I could pass all my classes and it wouldn't be nothing.

Jessica's success in school began to dissipate when she entered high school.

### **Jose**

Jose is a twenty-year-old Hispanic male who is the fourth of six children in his family. He lives at home with his family and both parents live in the home. Jose attended EFHS all four years of high school. He did not graduate with his peers because he had not passed all parts of the state exit exam required for graduation. He was not

coded as a dropout because he did graduate from high school after he passed all parts of the state exam during a summer administration and within five years of starting high school. I met Jose at EFHS where he was attending a summer *bridge program* as part of a partnership with a local community college and the BVISD. He was actually taking two community college courses during the summer and planned to continue the coursework the following fall semester. I chose to interview Jose because an EFHS staff member who believed Jose was at-risk for not finishing high school recommended him to me. Jose told me he had enjoyed high school, that his parents had not finished high school and wanted all their children to finish high school and go to college. All of his siblings had graduated from high school but he stated that one of his cousins in Mexico had dropped out of high school.

### **Rachel**

Rachel, like Jose, had not graduated with her peers because she had not passed all sections of the state exam prior to May graduation. She subsequently passed the tests during the summer after graduation and earned her diploma. An EFHS staff member who was concerned Rachel was at-risk for not finishing school also recommended that I interview Rachel, and like Jose, Rachel was participating in the same summer *bridge program* with the community college. Rachel credits being on the school soccer team with keeping her focused and in school. Rachel lives at home with her four older sisters, mother, and two younger siblings—a freshman in high school and an eighth grader. Rachel told me none of her four older sisters graduated from high school because they each had a baby. She does have an older brother in his early twenties who graduated

from high school and has entered the job market. She stated that he motivated her to finish high school but no one at home has motivated her to go to college.

### **Themes**

It was a challenge to separate the issues these students faced into distinct themes. Many of the issues the students were dealing with were so interconnected with one situation causing another situation to happen, and so on. It was as if nothing in their lives happened in isolation. One event impacted a decision and then caused another event to happen. This chain-like reaction will be evident when I discuss the themes below.

#### **School Disengagement**

One of the themes that emerged from the data was that of *school disengagement*. A sub-theme was *disconnection from school* because the students simply quit going to school and were therefore withdrawn due to lack of attendance. Another sub-theme that arose from the data was the students' perception of the *lack of support from school personnel*. These themes and sub-themes were seen in the words from Teresa, Jessica, and Daniel.

**Disconnection from school.** As discussed earlier, there are attendance requirements in the state of Texas and students must not miss more than 10 percent of the school year without jeopardizing credits earned for courses. School districts also lose funding when a student is absent. Therefore when a student is absent for an extended period of time and efforts to get the student to return to school fail, a school will often withdraw the student rather than have multiple absences for the student in the

PEIMS records. Jessica stated she was withdrawn because she had been assigned to the district discipline center.

... they sent me to District. And then after that I just got mad. I was like, No, I's not going to District so I just didn't end up going. When I did—wanted to go to District, they told me—they told me that I wasn't a student at [EFHS] no more so they withdraw me.

Before Jessica was assigned to the district discipline center, she had begun a pattern of missing school. She told me:

I mean, I didn't go some days then I would go back to school and then it was like that, like I wouldn't go like two days a week and then I'll go back to school and finish school. Like sometimes I wouldn't go four days a week, go the next day and then just go the whole next week to school. I would just go like that.

Daniel had a similar experience. He was also withdrawn by the school after he had stopped attending so he could work full-time to help support his family. However, Daniel was working with a staff member who had been assigned to try to get him back in school. Daniel described his conversation with the staff member:

Well I went with Mr. [staff member] and... he told me... from this day on, no more missing school, and I did. And I told him, I missed school. And then he was like, 'Oh, I can't do nothing for you no more. You're going to get withdrawn.' So I felt bad about that so I was like, okay. I'm going to get withdrawn. Might as well just, well, I—that's the way I thought because I kind of—kind of got disappointed in myself. But then again, I was like if they're going to withdraw me already, why should I keep just coming?

Daniel was withdrawn from school shortly after that conversation and was considered a dropout because he did not enroll in another school. Another student, Teresa, quit going to school because she was involved with a boyfriend who had quit going to school and she wanted to be with him during the day. As a result, the school also withdrew her. Teresa told me about her thinking at the time after missing many days of school and

trying to decide if she should return to school. She said, “I didn’t see the point. And then after a while it just got so to where I basically acted like I didn’t care and I just stopped going.”

**Lack of support from school personnel.** Jessica and Daniel also referenced moments prior to their disconnection from school, when they believed the school was not meeting their needs. Jessica did not earn enough credits in her freshman year to be classified as a sophomore her second year in high school. She stated that despite finding school easy during her elementary and middle school years, she began to experience academic difficulties during her freshman year, particularly in algebra. When I asked Jessica why she didn’t want to go to school she stated:

Mainly because, I mean, I knew what I had like going in school and it was just a struggle. Like I wouldn’t understand a lot of things. And I had a teacher who she’ll just hand me the work. She wouldn’t explain like – and I’ll ask her. She’ll be like ‘No. Well. It is your fault for not being here.’ And I’ll just tell her ‘Oh okay.’ And I wouldn’t do the work because why would I do it if I didn’t understand it?

When I asked Jessica if it was just one teacher that treated her that way or were there more, she responded:

No. There was only one teacher I could remember and I had her two years in a row for math. And that was my hardest subject so that’s my hardest subject so that’s why—that’s where I would get more stuck and I would get frustrated.

I asked Jessica what the adults in the school could have done to help her stay in school and she responded by saying:

Like I think my teacher should have just helped me out more with the work, shouldn’t have gave up on me, just should have pushed me to do it and I... I think like if they would have helped me out with the work I think I would have still been in school right now. She’ll [the math teacher] tell me that it was my fault because I didn’t go to school. She was like if you would come to school

every day you would know what we are doing so do your work. And I'll just tell her, 'Oh, okay,' and I wouldn't do my work. Because I didn't know how.

Jessica expressed a desire to return to school but stated:

Yeah, like I don't know what to do. Like I want to go back to school and just get my high school diploma and just walk through the stage, but I don't think it is going to be possible because they want me to be a freshman all over again.

Unlike Jessica, Daniel did not appear to face challenges with the schoolwork. He did, however, express some frustration with the school for not working with him to help him stay in school. EFHS assigns counselors and grade level principals to follow cohort groups through their four years of high school. In other words, as freshman enter high school they have a grade level counselor and principal that are with them each year of high school until they graduate. Daniel told me he had the same counselor in grades nine through eleven but in twelfth grade, that counselor was moved back to ninth graders and he had a new counselor. David discussed his frustrations with this situation below.

The [new] counselor, well, the counselor, I didn't see him help. We had another one, Mrs. ...I can't remember her last name, but she... really helped. She—I—like she really helped me a lot when I was in eleventh, tenth, because they changed her to ninth and then we got some other, Mr. ...I can't remember his name. Well, whenever I wouldn't like feel like talking to him like I made a lot of --you know how you've got to sign a paper before you talk to him? Well I did that a lot. I never got a response. So I was like well... You know that you fill out those papers and just put them in his box so he calls you from... Well, I talked to him but not—I didn't feel like talking to him about my situation because of how he acted with me. It was not like he cared so...I don't know. I was just like—and it was just not me. I had other... classmates that would say the same thing – you know, they would look for someone else to talk to... I really did not have any help from him at all.

I asked Daniel if the adults could do anything to help students stay in school and he said it would be helpful if the adults would talk to the students before they left and he also stated that the school could “offer you an alternative thing to do like another way to earn



your diploma.” When I asked Daniel, if anyone had offered him an alternative, he said no.

### **Family and Personal Problems**

All the students interviewed spoke about family and personal issues they had dealt with in their lives that impacted their school life. These issues resulted in two sub-themes that emerged from the data. These sub-themes were *financial hardships* and *personal issues related to life circumstances and/or peers*.

**Financial hardships.** As mentioned above, Daniel was working fulltime at the point of the interview. He told me that he had to go to work to help his family during a period when they were suffering financial hardships. David noted:

I had to help my parents with the situation we had, economic situation. My dad wasn't working and my mom – I mean she's a waitress so that would only go for the food so we had to get the rent and bills said. So I started working in the mornings and I had—I quit school for a while, but then Mr. [school personnel] talked to me and he made me see, like, see what I was, like doing wrong and doing right. And so for a while I was with the program because they helped my dad and then again we went back to that again so I started working in the afternoon.

In the last statement, Daniel would not elaborate on who helped his dad and what program they were in. I recall his face lit up when he spoke of his dad being helped. But Daniel still felt compelled to return to work and spoke about the rigorous schedule he had at work, often working into the early morning hours.

And where I worked as a waiter also we would leave like at 12:00, 1:00 and we had to do—you know, like clean up stuff so we would end up leaving at 1:30, around that. And since it's like – not this –it's not very close so I was—the time getting here, I was—I would be coming here like 2:00, 2:30, 2:45 so—and then not just that. I had to do some stuff at home so I would go to sleep at 4:00 or 5:00 so I wouldn't be able to make it to school the other day. I tried a few—like

a few weeks, but then I started feeling bad and—and I made a wrong decision of getting a car and I have to pay it.

Daniel continued to tell me that he would have liked to quit working because his dad had started working again at his previous job but because he had purchased a car, he had to continue to work to pay for the car. At first Daniel tried to work it out and would ask to change his shift at work so he could come later in the afternoon but at times he was late for work. He was also late to school frequently, if he made it at all. Finally, he was forced to make a decision and quit going to school completely and continued to work fulltime. David explained the situation after he tried again to have his bosses at work be more flexible with his schedule:

... I explained them that and they told me, Well, you're going to—you get school or you get the job. The same was with school. They told me, well, it's either the school or it's the job. It's kind of hard for me because I have a car now paying so I was in a situation, well I was—I needed the job but I needed school too. Well, I guess, I decided wrong...

Shortly after he quit going to school so he could work fulltime, he changed his schedule to work during the day so he didn't have to work during the middle of the night. He expressed relief about his new schedule but stated: "I still think about school..." Daniel stated that his parents tried to help him and did not want him to drop out. He volunteered:

[My parents] were always on top of me and I really appreciate that, but then again I had this situation where it was work or school, school or work. They didn't want me to [drop out], but they knew that they needed the help so I didn't gave them an option... It was kind of hard because I have a little sister and my brother and it's kind of hard seeing that we didn't have enough food to eat so I don't know. It was just very, very hard for me.

Daniel went on to say that he knew other students who had a similar dilemma because they were trying to help their family financial situation by working outside of the school day and the work was impacting their ability to be successful in school.

Teresa faced a similar scenario trying to balance the need to earn money by working while at the same time staying in school. Teresa stopped going to school fulltime during her senior year for personal reasons which will be discussed in the next section of this chapter. She moved out of her home where she lived with her mother and younger sister and ultimately moved into an apartment after spending some time living at her boyfriend's house. Jessica found a job at a local pizza delivery restaurant. She had begun to work there while she was still attending school. But once she quit school she told her bosses that she was able to devote more time to work. Jessica shared the conversation she had with her bosses:

... I had to work at the same time. And then after a while, when I told my boss like, 'Look, I haven't been going to school so if you want to set me up for in the morning or like in the middle of the day you can go ahead and do that. I'm not doing anything anyway.'

Teresa's bosses expressed concern about her not going to school and appeared to serve in a supportive, caring, parent-like role advising her to stay in school. Teresa stated:

And they asked me, 'Why aren't you going to school?' And I told them I just didn't want to go anymore. And they gave me this whole spiel about how, you know, if you don't go back, you know, you're going to have problems later on in – in life and you're not going to be able to get a good enough job like because [name of pizza restaurant] isn't going to take care of you forever. And I understood that and it makes complete and utter sense because it's not.

Teresa told me that she did not want to work at the pizza delivery place forever even though they had offered to send her to management training and that she was disappointed in herself for quitting school.

**Personal issues related to life circumstances or peers.** Teresa's issues in her personal life led to her dropping out of school and getting a fulltime job. It began with a boyfriend who had dropped out of school as she stated:

I would feel a little better had I just kept going, but I didn't. I decided to make the decision of letting my boyfriend—well, my ex-boyfriend take away that from me although I shouldn't have, but I did, and it kind of broke my heart.

Teresa's mother had moved outside of the district boundaries but still very close to EFHS. Teresa didn't want to change to another high school, "I didn't want to get transferred back and go through all that so I just gave them [the school] my best friend's address" so she could stay at EFHS. Teresa admitted that she began to spend more and more time at her boyfriend's house and often spent the night there and this resulted in arguments between she and her mother. Teresa stated:

... So much so to where I didn't really want to be home so I would spend the night at my boyfriend's house for at least a week then go home for about two days and then go back, and that was just typically to go get more clothes so I could just go back over there.

Teresa's boyfriend had dropped out of school telling Teresa that he was too smart for the classes and bored in school. And soon after that, Teresa quit attending school. She stated:

So I made the decision because I wanted to spend a lot of time with him, but it meant that, if I went to school, it meant that I wouldn't be able to be with him. And at that time, I really liked him. I really wanted to spend the most time I could with him. And after a while, when I would get there in the morning, I would get there and fall asleep. It would be about noon before I woke up and I missed half of the school day... I didn't see the point. And then after a while it just got to where I basically acted like I didn't care and I stopped going. And I, that's probably the case with a lot of girls. I'm not going to say, you know, that they all made the same decision I did, but I'm saying that in some cases that is what happens. A boyfriend can keep you from going to school but it shouldn't.

Teresa's mother told her that she could not live at their home anymore because, as Teresa said,

She told me she needed me to move out because... she feels like a taxicab and that I use the house as a hotel room. [She said] If you are going to be over there all the time, ...I might as well ask his mom if I could live there. I packed my clothes and took off.

When I asked Teresa if she could have moved in with her father, she told me she had never met her father and though they talked on the phone often, he lives out of state. She told me that when she told her father she had quit going to school, he yelled at her over the phone. Teresa left her boyfriend and his home to move into her own apartment after a couple of months. She had gotten pregnant, had a miscarriage, went into a depression and said she did some stupid things, like cut herself. She stated, "... I kind of got tired of him holding the miscarriage against me because of the stupid thing that I did and I left. I didn't want to be in that situation anymore." Teresa moved back in with her mother for about a month and then left again to move into her own apartment.

Jessica, the ninth grader who had been withdrawn from school due to excessive absences and was now considered a dropout, felt she too had been influenced by peers to make bad decisions about school. Jessica had a close group of friends at the middle school she attended in the BVISD. She spent the summer after her eighth grade year in Kentucky with relatives from her mother's side of the family. She stated:

So when I came back, I just came back to hang out with the same group of friends, but they were just doing other things. They were doing a lot things. Like just going out partying, drinking, and doing just a lot of things. So like whenever I came back, they would—one of my friends told me—Man, I couldn't wait until you come back because you're the one that's, that does everything with me. And then like sometimes she would skip school and she'll tell me, Man, I don't want to go alone because I barely, like I barely know these people. And

I'm like, Man, like I don't want to leave her alone either because she's my friend and what if something happens to her? So I'll just go with her. And like they'll be drinking and everything so I would drink and then I just got caught up with that.

Jessica told me she knew what she was doing was wrong and when I asked why she continued to hang out with those people and skip school, she told me, "I mean, like at the point I didn't really mind, but, I mean, I did know that I was falling off on my schoolwork and I did know that I wasn't doing things right like I should be." Her mother knew what was going on and threatened to send Jessica to live with her dad in another area of the city but Jessica did not go live with her dad.

Jessica stated she wanted to finish high school because she wanted to make her mother proud. She wants to be a social worker so she "can help kids like when they have trouble at home, put them in another home." She knew a social worker when she lived in Kentucky. She witnessed the social worker helping her cousin and "saw the things that her social worker would do for her..." After seeing the social worker in action, Jessica thought "... so I'll just look and I'll see and I'll be like, oh, what I want to do is I want to help people out like she does."

### **School Life**

Subthemes under this theme were students' feeling about school, their description of a dropout and what schools could do to prevent students from dropping out of high school.

**Students' feelings about school.** Teresa enjoyed high school until her senior year. She stated:

I did really enjoy high school, but then it started – stuff started happening although it shouldn't have, but it was fine. There was drama with ...cheerleaders, band, dance team... It was all basically like extra-curricular classes that brought everything, brought all the drama out about relationships and whatnot, like that, but it was basically that that broke it up for me.

Yet Teresa really liked being in the band and said that was her favorite part of high school.

That will always be band. It will forever be band because that's the most fun. It's the biggest family that you can have, you know, because at [EFHS] band is your family when it comes down to it. They mean the world to me and that's kind of one of the reasons I kept going back was because of band. It made me feel at home...

Daniel also liked school, particularly the teachers and the way they taught.

I had pretty good teachers. They were—well, they seemed that they—they care about us and they would like teach us. And the way they taught was something I enjoyed a lot, too. It wasn't just paper and book studying. It was more like examples. They would use stuff from like, you know, stuff that us teenagers like a lot and use it in math or history. It varied but it was very good. We had group work and activities.

Daniel told me that his favorite part of high school was his classmates.

Jessica stated that in the beginning, she liked high school because it was easy to get around and understand. She liked many of her classes at first until she began to experience difficulties learning and did not get help from one of her teachers. She also liked her friends. Rachel stated she loved school and playing soccer, "It kept me busy and I knew I had to do something after school and I was excited to practice in the morning too." She credits soccer for keeping her engaged in school. Rachel had not planned on going to college until she was a senior and everyone began to talk about it. She shared:

I just wanted to go to college. I learned about it in school... twelfth grade, everybody talked about it. Everybody had a plan and I wanted to have a plan too... I don't have anybody [at home] to motivate me to go to college so I'm motivating myself.

Jose expressed happiness with his high school experience and when asked what his favorite part of school was he referenced when he first started high school "It was a different experience from middle school, all the classes... I liked all the people. Everybody's new... teachers. I liked it... and graduating."

### **Dropouts and What Schools Can Do to Prevent Students From Dropping Out**

I asked each of the student participants what a school could do to prevent students from dropping out of school and how they would describe a dropout. Several of the students described the typical dropout in an effort to help me understand the life of a dropout. The students had similar descriptions of dropouts yet their descriptions seemed to be somehow related to their own circumstances. Jessica, Jose, and Rachel all stated that most of the dropouts they knew were males. They each knew males, either family members or friends, who had dropped out of high school. Rachel thought most of the students dropped out because of having babies and she had four sisters who dropped out of high school because they got pregnant. Jessica described dropouts as students who had discipline problems, were doing drugs, or other things they should not have been doing and this description was very similar to her own circumstances. She described a dropout as follows:

... Yeah, a dropout, that he'd have to be like always doing drugs like smoking or something, that it will, like that makes people, you know, not want to try in school and do a lot of different things, just walk out and just do a lot of things that they're not supposed to do.



Jose thought one of the reasons students drop out is because they have hard jobs and therefore slept in class. Daniel's description of a drop out was seemingly non-specific when he stated:

I think it was depending on their situation they were having because it's not, it's not school that people don't like. It's just that maybe they have problems at home or... It's not school a lot. I think more it's because of what's going on in their homes and stuff like that... and there are parents, many parents I see that they're not interested in their kids. I think they don't show them that they love them or care about them and they just decided that they don't care... so they just stop going to school.

All the students suggested that someone from the school talk to the students

about staying in school. Teresa said:

Talk them into it, actually like persuade them to come back and understand that if you don't make the decision to just get your high school diploma because you can get a GED but in some places they're not going to take that.

Teresa was working full time at the pizza delivery restaurant when someone from the school approached her to participate in a special program the school district had created for students like her who had dropped out their senior year. In order for a student to qualify for the program, they had to have passed all sections of the state's exit exams, started their senior year with enough credits to graduate, but for some reason had dropped out their senior year. The students were pulled off their campus the last six weeks of school and attended classes all day on the campus of the alternative education center. If students attended class all day and did the work to earn the credits they needed to graduate, they were guaranteed graduation with their peers in May. She talked about her thinking when she was approached to participate in the special program aptly named Operation Graduation:

So you have to kind of think of the long run whether you want to go—you know, go to college or do something with yourself. Either way, the high school diploma is really going to help you. And that's another thing that I was, as I had been thinking the week before to think about it, I kind of thought of all the things that could happen if I got my diploma and I just said, Hmmm, the chances of not having my high school diploma and just having a GED and actually making it are very slim so let's just go with the high school diploma and I'm just going to get this done.

Teresa's final words about what the school could do to help students who were contemplating or who had already dropped out were:

Kind of do what they did for me, you know, show up at their work if you have to. Show up at their house and talk to them. You know, not shove it down their throat, you know, and say, No. You have to come back to school.

Teresa graduated in May with her peers and continues to work at the pizza delivery restaurant.

Jessica had similar advice about schools helping students who have dropped out when she stated, "They should just probably try to talk to them, try to visit their homes and just talk to them, talk to them how they could recover on their credits and just help them out." Jose also thought talking to the students was the best thing to do but was not confident talking to the students would always work. He stated, "I don't know what could be better because they—they try to talk to them, talk to their parents. They try to do everything, but I guess it's their [the student's] decision."

Rachel was not confident the school could do anything to keep the student from dropping out of school. When asked if the school could do anything to get dropouts to return to school, she stated:

No. I think once they drop out they—they like it more. They get used to it. It's like when you finish high school and you say you're going to take a break and

then go to college, your break lasts forever. You don't end up going. You don't end up going back.

Daniel had a lot to say when asked questions about what the school could do to help students who were or had already dropped out of high school. I specifically asked him if talking to an adult at school could help. He thought for a long time and then said:

... whenever a teacher or something would tell me that [to stay in school], okay, yeah, because they were, you know, they had their jobs and stuff like that, but they never dropped out so they didn't know what you feel... what's the feeling of wanting, or the reasons for dropping out. They just tell you, 'Oh, look at this. Look at this,' but they never say, 'Okay, I know you have problems.' This could be happening, this or whatever, but should be going on, you know? Yeah it helps to talk. The older people talk to you because they make you realize some stuff that we're not thinking of or seeing. But it would also help to talk to kids who have dropped out but are back in school and have good jobs.

Daniel also wanted the school to have more options for students—not just school or work—the only options he was given. He said he would have looked at the other options if he had been presented with them. He said, “I know they wanted me to finish school because it is the appropriate way, but not everyone could just finish school just like everybody else.” He offered suggestions such as homeschooling or some other school. His final thoughts on this topic were:

So for them to think that all of us that go to school are going to finish school the way everybody else has done it, I don't think it works with everybody. So people that don't see the other options and they just get those two options (work or school) and they just get those two options ... they're just like, well, I wanted school but I have to work so I think I'm just going to keep on working because school will help us in the long way but not right now. And sometimes we need the help now and the job will would get it now.

Daniel also suggested that schools really get to know the students who have dropped out “... not just how they act in school but how they really live off campus.” He thought there should be more activities for students to get involved in at school that would keep

them busy after school but didn't cost any money. Soon after I spoke to Daniel, he also enrolled in the special program, Operation Graduation, and graduated with his peers in May. He was able to keep his grueling work schedule so he could help with finances at home and participate in the program at the same time. The personnel in charge of Operation Graduation allowed Daniel to have a more flexible schedule at school so he could keep his work schedule.

### **Summary of Student Informants**

I interviewed five students and using an interview protocol, asked each student the same set of sixteen open-ended questions. This gave me an opportunity to gather comprehensive data regarding their perceptions of what caused them to drop out of school and/or not graduate with their peers, as well as their perceptions of what their school could have done to prevent students from dropping out of high school. At the beginning of this section, I provided a detailed description of each student so the reader could gain better insight into each participant. Each of the participants told a compelling story of what had happened to them in their young lives and what led up to the circumstances that caused them to be interviewed. Three of the students had actually left school and were considered dropouts and two of the students had not graduated with their peers because they had not passed the state exit exam in time for May graduation. Two of the informants expressed frustration with the school for not working with them more to keep them in school. Three of the students did not blame the school, and one student blamed herself for choosing to leave school. Four of the five students eventually graduated from school. Two of these students graduated after they passed the state exit

exam, and two students, because they were included in the special Operation Graduation program during the last six weeks of what was their senior year, they did end up graduating on time with their peers. Only one of the five—a second time freshman—is still not in school.

The three main themes that emerged from the students interviews were: (a) school disengagement, (b) family and personal problems, and (c) school life. There were sub-themes that emerged from each theme. The theme of school disengagement had two subthemes. One of the subthemes was disconnection from school which contains factors related to the students being withdrawn from school because a lack of attendance. There were circumstances related to personal issues that caused them to quit attending school. The second sub-theme was that of the students' perceptions of a lack of support from school personnel. Teachers who did not assist students with challenging work and the school's lack of flexibility in scheduling so that the students could continue to work and attend school at the same time, were cited within this sub-theme. The primary issue in this sub-theme was three students did not feel the school cared enough to listen to them and help them with their life circumstances.

The second theme of family and personal problems had two sub-themes. The first was financial hardships and dealt with issues such as a student having to work fulltime to support the family and/or themselves. One student had to get a fulltime job to help supplement the family income when his father lost his job. Another student was working fulltime to support herself after moving out of her mother's home. The second sub-theme had to do with personal problems the students faced in their lives and

ultimately caused them to dropout. These issues included a pregnancy and peers who were abusing alcohol and drugs and/or not attending school.

The third theme was school life and had two sub-themes. The first sub-theme was students' feelings about school. For the most part each student had positive remarks to say about their school. One loved the extra-curricular program—band, another liked the teachers and friends, and another credited the school with opening the door to college. Only one of the students expressed a great deal of frustration with the teachers—one teacher in particular. The second sub-theme was the students' suggestions as to what the school could do to keep students from dropping out. These included the ideas of talking to students and/or visiting their homes in an effort to try to understand the issues they were facing in their personal lives. The students described what they thought a typical dropout “looked like” to explain to me the issues dropouts were facing. They suggested offering more options for class scheduling to allow students to work while attending school and perhaps more extra-curricular programs to entice students to stay in school.

### **Professional Staff Participants and Their Stories**

I have listed the five professional staff member from EFHS who I interviewed in Table 25 below. Their names have been changed and I initially listed their position at the school but have removed that information in an effort to protect their identity as well. All professional staff work with EFHS students and have been at the campus from five to seven years. None of the staff members are classroom teachers and four of the five have master's degrees in education. All of the staff members play a role in preventing

dropouts, recovering dropouts, trying to locate students who withdraw from campus, and believe they are very familiar with the causes and issues related to dropouts and drop out prevention and recovery. Again, more specific information regarding the adults' individual job responsibilities will not be mentioned here in order to protect their identities.

Table 25  
*Adult Participants' Roles and Number of Years at EFHS*

Participant	Number of Years at EFHS	Role
Mary	7	Professional Staff
Roger	7	Professional Staff
Horacio	5	Professional Staff
Tatum	7	Professional Staff
Teria	7	Professional Staff

### Themes

There were two main themes that were revealed in the adults' interview data. One theme was the *Description of a Dropout* with the sub-themes of *disengagement from school* and *student family/personal issues*. The second main theme was *Lack of Systems* that included the sub-themes of *communication, truancy, and programming*.

## Description of the Dropout

One of the questions I asked both adults and students was *How would you describe a typical dropout at EFHS?* The answers from both adults and students were very similar. The adults talked about how they could see students who began to stop coming to class or had poor grades. They also talked about students who had family or personal problems that got between the students and schoolwork.

**Disengagement.** Mary, who has worked at EFHS for seven years in several different roles but always directly with students, described the situation as follows:

Our biggest problem I think is the students who stop coming to school. It's the students who stop coming and then you're dealing with attendance issues and really being able to stay on the ball with that quickly because we're very busy dealing with all those students that are here... constantly.

Tatum shared the same concern when she stated:

[What we] probably struggle with the most are the ones who just kind of stop coming to school. And, you know, we do make home visits, but they don't always answer the door... those kids that just quit coming to school are hard to deal with... the other ones that are hard are the ones that kind of skip out during the middle of the night and they're a cold trail.

Teria shared her thoughts with me when she said, "What's the saying? If they don't come they don't learn. And if they don't learn, they don't come." Roger continued with the sub-theme of disengagement when he stated:

They just see no reason and they just flat out quit coming, you know. I mean a true dropout. And I mean for no other reason than they just don't feel connected to school. I don't think they actually see a need, they don't see a need nor have a major desire to get an education. The quitting starts with poor attendance and poor grades their freshman year. And then there is a repeat freshman year, it kind of goes on from there. And it doesn't really start their freshman year. I think it starts in sixth grade or fifth grade, but I think what happens as they get older they—skipping school—and [are] told, you have these absences and now



you have to do this makeup work... and these kids who wouldn't do the minimum before and now we are asking them to do the minimum plus...

Tatum also discussed students who repeat their freshman year two, three, four times and then they are overage as a ninth grader. She believed that students tend to drop out either as overage freshman or in their junior year. As juniors or beginning of their senior year “...they just—I don't know if it is a fear of graduating. I mean, it's – or fear of life” they drop out. She elaborated by saying:

I think they're unsuccessful in school. They start struggling with their grades and then they quit coming. They get themselves... in a hole and they don't know how to get out and then the hole gets deeper and deeper and deeper... they really can't see out anymore and... it's just overwhelming to them and they just quit. They're just kind of hopeless. *We* [emphasis original] have to step in and really try to show them they can get out of this.

Horacio described how the teachers would work with counselors to report students they are concerned about because the student has quit coming to school, is sleeping in class, not paying attention, and begins to appear disengaged. Roger said the typical dropout has limited English proficiency, is truant, and might be working fulltime.

**Students' family/personal issues.** Mary told me that most of the students she works with have family issues that cause students to leave home or because the parents do not seem to care about their child's education.

Students are so mobile. I mean they – they be, ‘Oh Miss, I haven't been home in a week – I'm staying over here.’ What I see often is a student whose home situation is not working for them... or the parents who really are not, you know, in my perception providing a home that, that is the optimal place for a student to be. The kids we work with at [EFHS] grow up more quickly than students at other high schools, not like the one my son graduated from. The kids at [EFHS], they're surrounded by people who are doing the same thing.

Roger described dropouts as tending to be very transient because the people who are responsible for them are transient and it is very challenging to keep up with these types of students. Horacio described students who drop out as Hispanic students from low-income homes who often just disappear. He said:

They just disappear. And sometimes parents are working either all night long or way early in the morning and they don't realize that their kids are not in school. Hispanics in a low socio-economic level with no moral, I mean with no family support, with no role models at home, more than likely not even a high school education background, and a high percentage of teenage pregnancy.

Teria said that because many of their students qualify for free or reduced lunch they are dependent on the school to help them. She said, "So many times they were trying to withdraw to work for employment reasons. And the school needs to have a more flexible schedule for the students to take classes."

Tatum described some of the students by saying:

[Students have] a difficult home life, maybe parents that are either working too many jobs or are absent from the home for whatever reason. Maybe they're incarcerated, maybe they're, you know, living somewhere else temporarily, the parents are not around; the student does not have a strong tie to the school. And that could be, you know, academically or socially they just don't have a strong tie to the school and they don't see the importance of finishing school. Some of them are currently working and they think what they're earning or what they're getting from their current job is sufficient to live on. You know they're parents – they're teenage parent sometimes.

Tatum went on further to explain that many of the dropouts are economically disadvantaged and unsuccessful in school.

## **Lack of Systems**

All the adults referenced issues at the campus and/or district level that can be placed in a category of systems—or a lack thereof. These systems were the subthemes of communication, truancy, and programming.

**Communication.** Mary expressed concern about the lack of systems in place to interrupt the student withdrawal process and prevent students from dropping out of high school. She said:

So I don't think that there is a set procedure in place that says 'You know, if your principal wants to withdraw this student, we have to make sure that we talk to this person, and get that student set up somewhere, you know, as they leave. That a student can be gone for three or four days and you don't catch it. You don't know it until somebody says 'Hey, where has this kid been,' and then you start focusing on that... [We need] sort of an alert system.

Mary discussed the school's system for having students make up time for their many absences. Recall earlier I discussed those students who miss more than 10% of a course risk losing credit for the course. But they are given the option to make up the time in some form of an Alternative Learning Assignment (ALA) in order to earn credit in the class. This can be accomplished by doing volunteer work, extra-credit course work, or anything that the grade level principal deems appropriate. As a result, there are inconsistencies in how the ALA policy is implemented. Mary stated:

You know, the policy, the district policy is followed, but kind of the way it's gone—you know, the way you go about it is a little different... when I worked under [grade level principal] he wanted everybody to write an essay and then, we have to read the essay and determine what is going on with the student. When working under [another assistant principal] she doesn't do essays and I'm less involved with the ALA's in her office. The secretary and her really do it.

Mary described the ALA system as inconsistent and time consuming to keep up with and monitor because not only did she have to have a record of which students needed ALA time, the school personnel had to talk to the students.

Teria described how each grade level office handled attendance, ALA, home visits, and parent phone calls a little differently. There was no set plan for keeping track of students' ALA hours and each office placed different emphasis on each part of the process. She expressed frustration that there was no standard sense of urgency to save students from dropping out and that grade level administrators should be held more accountable for their students. Teria stated:

The counselors were aware of the dropout rate. The assistant principals were aware, central administration was aware. I found that those students that are dropouts, there were indicators long before they disappeared, whether it was grades, or attendance. I don't see the efforts that have been made by the grade level offices. I do not know if they have requested home visits. I do not know if they have made parent phone calls. And in the end, I'm asked, 'What was done to prevent this dropout?' The lack of communication about the dropouts is an issue. I don't want to point fingers but we have issues with communication about dropouts at this school. The dropout issue and the buy-in and who's paying attention and who isn't and what it means and what it doesn't mean to some people.

Teria stated that she thinks the assistant principals should be held more accountable for the dropout issue and that perhaps in the interviewing process, the district could see if the person is really committed to preventing dropouts.

**Truancy.** One issue that several of the adults mentioned was that of truancy and what the school district could do to support the campus efforts to track down truant students and get them back in school. The district has several police officers in the

BVISD police department who assist campuses with monitoring absenteeism. Mary stated:

... when we are talking about attendance and the kids not coming to school, I don't know what resources the district has, but working with the students who are truant would be a good thing. You know, maybe some more immediate district consequences to truancy...

Tatum also had issues with the district truancy program. She stated:

I think we have a really hard time with truancy and our truancy program is not working. The truancy department does what we—what I would call long hanging fruit. You know they come to school to talk about truancy. They don't spend enough time going to the home to talk about truancy. So they are talking to the kids who came to school about truancy and not the ones who are home. I think if we had more support with truancy officers to help us.

Horacio, Roger, and Teria also talked about the need for more police officers to assist with truant students and how to go about dealing with those students. Horacio told me, "I think if we could have a few more officers that would be beneficial." Teria stated, "We have two truancy officers for the whole district. Maybe we could increase the truancy officers and somehow incorporate that with holding the assistant principals more accountable." Roger said:

The truancy program is just horrible. The communication is very poor between us and the police department and every year there's changes put in place. Basically we're told that something is not being done right until it's already become an issue. For example, we had a student who had absences in the fall and was referred for absences, we only refer once. He had more absences during the spring. He finally went to court in June and we found out he had cancer. They [the court] threw the case out.

Roger was upset because it took so long for the case to go to court and the police officers did not know the student was absent because he had cancer. He stated that once a student is referred to the truancy department, the process is in the department's hands.

An issue somewhat related to truancy is that of trying to locate students who have left the school but not enrolled in another public school. Mary, Teria, and Roger expressed frustration that there is not a district-wide systemic approach to tracking these students and yet, the local campus is held accountable if these students end up being coded as dropouts. Nor is there a district-wide systemic approach to finding options for students who have quit coming to school but want to graduate.

**Programming.** Mary believed the school had programming available to assist students who were behind in earning enough credits to graduate on time. She stated:

We had students working with [individual computer coursework] and all that kind of thing... to make sure they finished up whatever they needed to finish, so the flexibility, and then really working with, you know, [alternative school] and some of the programs that the district offered to help kids with more flexibility.

Mary did go on to state that perhaps there needed to be more programs available to students. Yet Horacio and Roger spoke about the academic programs—or lack there of—for students who are contemplating dropping out of the system or have already dropped out. Horacio said:

We need vocational training, whether it's A/C or mechanics or something that will keep them in school. That will give them like the opportunity to say 'okay. I'm going to get my high school diploma, but at the same time I'm getting these skills that are going to help me in the future.'

The BVISD does have a career center, which offers some Career and Technology (CTE) courses, and there are a few CTE courses located on each high school campus. Roger expressed frustration that there are not more opportunities for students who do not want to go to college. Roger stated:

All the students are to be thrown into the same, college preparatory program that everyone else is and without being given an option. And I know we don't want

to limit their opportunities to go to college, but I think by being so cognizant of the fact that we're not limiting, that we are so concerned with limiting it, we're really not giving them an opportunity to be successful in anything else. And I guess the [CTE] Center is kind of a blessing and a curse. It's a blessing because they run a great program, but it's a bit of a hardship because the campuses do not have that program on their own campus and they're not flexible to be able to offer the kids what they need. And students can be engaged in a variety of ways, but usually once a kid finds something they're hooked into, they tend to keep coming and they do okay... and getting them hooked is the key.

Roger also added "I don't know that I feel capable of addressing that [programming] and I don't know if we have a program to fit those kids' needs."

Teria offered a suggestion about programming when she said, "...we need some dropout committee and different people to do different things."

### **Summary of Adult Participants**

I interviewed five adult school personnel who had worked at the EFHS for a minimum of five years, with four of the five having worked at the school for a period of seven years. I interviewed each participant with the same interview protocol, which contained twelve open-ended questions. There were two main themes that emerged from the data. The first theme was the participants' description of a dropout and the second theme was that of lack of systems. The participants' descriptions of a dropout included two sub-themes, disengagement from school and the family/personal issues that the students faced. Participants described dropouts as students who do not come to school because they had moved or just quit coming because they no longer felt connected with the school due to poor grades, repeated freshman year at least once if not more, and had overall poor academic performance. The participants also described various family or personal problems the students face before or after they drop out of

school. Some of the problems, according to these staff, included students who had left their primary residence, had very transient lifestyles, and had no family support due to absent or working parents. They also stated that the students had a low socio-economic standard of living with no role models in the home and may have worked to help support themselves or their families.

The second theme, lack of systems, included three sub-themes. The first sub-theme was that of communication, or lack thereof, among the faculty and staff in terms of keeping track of students who may be at-risk of dropping out of school or have already dropped out of school. Several staff shared that there was no standard practice or procedure for keeping up with the students who had excessive absences or were exhibiting poor academic performance. Nor was there a standard practice or procedure among the grade level offices for how students regain credit in a course by making up missed time through ALA. Another sub-theme was truancy. Several participants expressed frustration about not having a sufficient number of truancy officers to follow up with students who were not coming to school. They also mentioned that the way truant students were handled was not working because the students who had been truant and returned to school were penalized, instead of officers visiting their homes to issue citations and urging them to return to school. The third sub-theme that emerged from the data was that of academic programming. Three adult participants mentioned this was an issue and stated that there were not enough career-type classes available to students to learn skills or trades that could help them earn a living and thereby would entice the students to stay in school. Another concern expressed by the participants was



that there were not enough programming options for students who needed to work while they were in school.

In the following fifth and final chapter, I will further discuss the findings in the context of the literature presented in Chapter II and implications for dropout prevention and recovery at EFHS and in the BVISD.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this inquiry was to conduct an in-depth study of the students who dropped out of EFHS during the years of 2007 and 2010 for the purpose of creating a profile of a dropout at the school. An additional purpose was to develop a plan to reduce the number of students who dropout of EFHS and the district as a whole. EFHS is one of four comprehensive high schools in the BVISD school district in a suburban area and has the highest dropout rate of all the schools in the district. The EFHS has a student body primarily made up of Hispanic students who live at or below the poverty line and therefore qualify for subsidized meals at the school. The BVISD has a very diverse student population with schools that serve students from extreme wealth and other schools similar to EFHS with students coming from extreme poverty and all economic levels in between.

The quantitative portion of the study included 281 students who dropped out of EFHS between the years of 2007 and 2013. The data showed that of the 281 student dropouts, 82.5% were Hispanic, which was commensurate with the fact that the majority of students at EFHS are Hispanic. Forty-six percent of the dropouts were age 18 at the time they dropped out, and 25% dropped out at age 17, and 31% of the students dropped out in ninth grade, followed by 26% percent who dropped out in tenth grade. These last two sets of data would indicate that a large number of the dropouts were overage freshman at the time they dropped out of school. One hundred twenty-nine or 46% of the 281 dropouts spent a second year in at least one grade level because they had not

earned enough credits to progress to the next grade level within a year's time. One hundred forty-two or 50% of the dropouts did not repeat another grade. Seventy-eight percent of the dropouts between 2008 and 2010 withdrew themselves or were withdrawn because of a lack of attendance and never entered another public school—they disappeared. The 2008 through 2010 cohort groups of dropouts had on average in excess of sixteen absences each year for a five-year period. Absentee rates were incomplete for the 2011 through 2013 cohort groups. At least half of the students in each cohort group had discipline infractions over a four-year period.

The study's qualitative design included the use of qualitative and quantitative methodology in collecting and analyzing the EFHS data. Quantitative data was used as a method to provide triangulation to the qualitative data. The qualitative data sought to unveil current and previous dropout prevention and recovery programs on the campus as well as data that emerged from the transcribed interviews with five students who had attended EFHS and had not graduated with their peers, and five professional adults who had worked at EFHS for several years. The review of literature included research on the causes of dropouts examining both conventional reasons to explain why students dropout as well as research that challenges and criticizes the conventional research.

The qualitative data that emerged from the interviews included perceptions of the adult employees of EFHS who had worked at EFHS for at least five years and five students who had attended EFHS. Of the students, three had dropped out of EFHS prior to graduation and two had not graduated on time with their peers due to not passing all portions of the state exit exam prior to graduation. All but one of the five students did

end up graduating from high school. The student who has not graduated is the repeating freshman.

The themes seen in the data from the adult interviews included their perceptions of the causes of dropouts and what the school was doing or not doing to prevent students from dropping out of school. The themes included the adults' perceptions of a dropout with sub-themes of students' disengagement from school and the family and/or personal issues that the dropouts are experiencing in their lives. The adults described dropouts as students who just quit coming to school and do not appear interested in school, have poor academic performance and may have been overage for their grade level at the time they dropped out. They also listed among transient lifestyles, no family support, poverty, and no role models among the characteristics of dropouts. The second theme that emerged from the adult participants was that of a lack of systems to support dropout prevention and recovery. This theme included three sub-themes: (a) communication issues, (b) truancy prevention related issues, and (c) academic programming. The adults indicated that there was not a clear procedure or communication channel to monitor students at-risk for dropping out of school. Every grade level office handled the monitoring and assisting of students in a different manner, with different expectations on how to regain credit due to excessive absences. Students slipped through the cracks in the system and disappeared from school before anyone from the staff could try to get them back in school.

Other concerns expressed by the staff were that there were not enough district truant officers to help find missing/absent students and instead of going to the homes of

truant students, the officers would come to campus and ticket former truant students who had returned to school, ticketing them for past absences. When discussing academic programming, the adults expressed concern that there were not enough career-type classes for students who were not interested in attending college but wanted to enter the workforce after high school. They also stated that there were not enough academic programming options for students who need to work to support families or themselves.

Student interview data yielded three main themes: (a) school disengagement, (b) family and personal issues, and (c) school life. The school disengagement theme had two subthemes of school disengagement and a lack of support from school personnel. Students discussed how they had been withdrawn from school due to excessive absences and seemed to have given up. They had personal issues in their lives that impacted their decision to disconnect from school. These issues were related to family financial hardships and peers who seemed to pull them away from school. One student talked about a teacher who had not helped her in math; her most difficult subject. She gave up on learning the subject and gives partial credit to the teacher for disengaging from school.

Furthermore, students did not feel that the school was willing to work them through the issues they were dealing with and this one was of the reasons they disengaged from school. The theme of family and personal issues had two sub-themes, financial hardships and personal issues. Peer group pressure, a pregnancy, and having to support the family were life circumstances the students were dealing with at the time they dropped out of school. There were two subthemes under the theme of school life.

The first was the students' overall feelings about school life and for the most part, the students expressed that they liked school. The other subtheme was the students' suggestions for what the school could do to hold students in school versus seeing them drop out of school. Students suggested that the school really try to understand the issues facing the student by talking with them or visiting their homes and offering more scheduling options.

### **Discussion of Results**

As I reviewed the results of this study, I compared what I found in the data—both qualitative and quantitative—to what the scholarship says about dropouts. I reflected on what the research scholarship says about who is dropping out of high school and why they are dropping out. The quantitative data revealed much of what is seen in the conventional research on dropouts. As stated earlier, there were 281 dropouts from EFHS over a three-year period. The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network and Communities in Schools (2007) listed several risk factors associated with school dropouts. These factors (compiled by Hammond, Linto, Smirk, & Drew, 2007) included risk factors such as working fulltime, parenthood, high-risk peer group, high-risk social behavior, low school achievement, prior retention, overage, poor school attendance, low commitment to school, and no extra-curricular involvement. Each of the EFHS students had one or more of these risk factors. Other risk factors listed were related to family background and family commitment to education, and the EFHS students had several of these risk factors. These were low socio-economic status, low education level of the

parents, not living with both natural parents, having a sibling who dropped out, and low contact with the school.

The report further stated that there was no single reason to explain why students drop out of high school and that students participating in the 2007 study generally reported more than one reason for dropping out (Hammond et al., p. 21). Again, three of the students I interviewed stated several issues occurring in their lives at the same time that interconnected and impacted their decision to leave school before graduation. One could posit that each factor alone may contribute to pushing or pulling the students out of school but when more than one factor is prevalent in the student's life, the combination of risk factors may be the tipping point at which the decision is made to leave school.

Other studies looked more closely at family and personal factors that may impact the student's decision to drop out of high school. One study (Okey & Cusick, 1995) stated that students who come from low-income homes with parents who have a low level of education themselves may cause the student to be at-risk for dropping out because parents from poverty typically do not advocate for their children and are not involved in the school community like families with higher incomes. According to the Okey and Cusick (1995) study, students from low-income homes may not have anyone in the home that knows how to support their child in school and this may impact the student's desire to finish high school. Low-income families may be in survival mode because they are consumed with working to meet basic family needs and not able to focus on their children's education. Students may elect to go to work to help support the

family and according to another study (Entwisle, Alexander & Olson, 2005) which examined the connection between the age at which a student enters the work force and dropping out of high school, found that students who entered the work force in middle or high school were more likely to drop out.

This same study (Entwisle, Alexander & Olson, 2005) found being overage due to previous grade retention contributed to the desire to drop out of high school. Working full time may cause a student to be absent from school thereby causing the student to have gaps in their educational attainment (Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007; Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990) and as a result they may lose confidence in their ability to succeed in school and graduate. The conventional studies on dropouts that attempted to explain why students drop out of high school and, like the reasons stated above, focused on issues students and families were dealing with but very little in these studies focused on the school, staff or the greater system and their responsibilities in pushing students out of school.

The student interview data revealed that in fact, the EFHS students did possess many of the at-risk factors seen in the conventional dropout literature. Two of the students were working fulltime—one to help support his family during tough economic times and one to support herself because she had moved out of her home to live with her boyfriend. This student did get pregnant and had a miscarriage. Two of the students were overage; particularly the second year freshman who was experiencing great difficulty in algebra and was very frustrated with the teacher who blamed her for not understanding the math. One of the students was living in her home with four older



sisters who had dropped out of high school due to having a child. All the students were from low-socio-economic homes with parents barely making ends meet. Yet all the students seemed to have liked school and the parents I spoke with cared very much about their children's education. They all knew the importance of getting an education and all but one of the students did end up graduating from high school. Two of the four graduated after they passed the state exit exam and two of the students graduated after a district staff member – me – intervened and got them enrolled in Operation Graduation.

When I reflected on the adult interview data, I realized that the EFHS adult participants' views on why students drop out of high school were quite similar to the conventional studies on the causes of dropping out of school. The adults spoke about their students in terms of being from low-socio-economic households, unsupportive or inattentive parents, transient lifestyles, high absentee rates and truancy, low-school achievement, being overage, pregnant, and/or disengaged from school. Very little was said about the school's role in why a student chooses not to attend school, has low achievement, is overage, disengages from school, or simply disappears and never returns to school. The adults did talk about their frustrations with the district's truancy department for not tracking down students who were not attending school and not having communication systems in place on campus to better monitor students exhibiting behaviors that showed they were losing interest in school.

A couple of the adults did speak to the fact that there were not enough options for students in terms of appropriate coursework for students who did not want to attend college and the ability to be more flexible in the overall academic program for students

who needed to work to support families. One adult even stated he did not know if he was capable of addressing the needs of students who just quit coming to school.

As I thought of the descriptions of dropouts through the lens of the literature critiquing the conventional dropout literature, I see quite a different picture of the causes of dropouts; as well as the adults and students in this study. I thought about Valencia's (2011) term *school holding power* and the school's ability to hold onto students instead of seeing them drop out. Valencia argues that the adults in the school system need to look within themselves to discover why a student becomes disengaged from school and that it is the adults' responsibility to ensure that all students graduate from high school. He stated too often schools focus on what is wrong with the student and their families or their race—their deficits—instead of focusing on what strengths the students possess or what role the school/school system plays in pushing a student out of school. Valencia calls this deficit thinking or *blaming the victim*. He argues that schools often see typically marginalized students and Hispanic students as victims of their own environments and therefore not capable of being successful. I definitely heard this theme of deficit thinking in the adult interviews. Valencia stated if an educator has deficit thinking and sees Hispanics as being inferior because of their life circumstances, they may see them as not being able to fulfill graduation requirements and therefore the adults are blaming the students instead of looking within themselves for the students' academic failures.

The theme of disengagement emerged from both the adult and student interview data. The adults spoke about student disengagement in terms of issues the students were

experiencing outside of school such as lack of family support, financial issues, or other personal problems that caused them to become disengaged from school. In fact, it was stated by school personnel that some students just quit coming to school. The students spoke of disengagement in similar ways as the adults when two of them stated they had experienced personal and family financial struggles that were occurring in their lives at the time they decided to dropout out of school. But one of these two students expressed concern that he was not given any other options regarding how to earn his diploma since he had to work full time to support his family. His choices were to either attend school the traditional way or be withdrawn because he was working. A third student admitted she was having personal problems and hanging out with students who were not good influences, however she expressed frustration with a particular teacher for not helping her understand Algebra, and thus failing not only that course but several others resulting in her having to repeat ninth grade. She did not want to do this. Furthermore, she admitted having anger issues and getting in trouble a lot at school, which resulted in her being assigned to the district's alternative discipline campus. She admitted that she gave up on school and did not attend because she was frustrated with the school system.

Valencia (2010) also referred to another theoretical perspective by explaining the failure of many Hispanic students in our public schools through structural inequalities or systemic inequalities. This occurs when a system—in this case a school and school system and a state education agency—support schools that maintain the status quo and refuse or do not know how to make the changes necessary to adapt the system to meet the needs of all students and in this case Hispanic students from low-income households.

The EFHS students and adults expressed frustrations with the fact that there were not more academic programming options for students to keep students engaged and enrolled in school. Students were withdrawn from school if they missed too many days because of work or personal reasons and it was better for the school to withdraw them and not take hit on their accountability rating for having a low attendance rate. Again, the students were at fault for not fitting into the established, well-oiled machine of public schools instead of the system being flexible enough to change to fit the students' needs. One of the adults stated that he knew all of the students were expected to complete the same high school program that prepared students for college and he knew not all of his students wanted to go to college. He wanted more options for his students yet seemed to feel powerless to make it happen. Another staff member described the efforts the school made to prevent and/or recover dropouts and stated she thought they were successful, yet admitted they were losing some students and did not have any additional ideas to stop losing students.

Ryan (1976) also wrote about blaming the victim and describes the victim blamer as someone who likes the system the way it is and someone who is quite successful in the current system and really does not want it to change, though he/she realizes that there are people who live in poverty. Ryan says the victim blamer then justifies the plight of the victim by seeing them as inferior and needing to be healed so they can fit into the current system. In some ways, this thinking was prevalent in the interview data because the students believed they had to fit into the current school practices and programming and so did the staff. The staff tried to get the students to comply with rules in the current

system by issuing tickets for excessive absences, retaining them when they did not meet criteria to be promoted to the next grade level, disciplining them when they argued with the teacher over frustration with learning math, withdrawing them when they had to work to support their families, and forcing them to take the same academic program as everyone else or fail. The students were made to feel as if they were inferior and were the victims.

There was a wealth of information in the literature about racism and prejudice and how they play out in the public school setting. Bonilla-Silva (1997) argued that racism is a combination of prejudice and power with the White population dominating every aspect of society including public schools. Berlowitz and Durand (1977) noted there are a disproportionate number of poor, minority, and working class students represented among the population of dropouts and referred to this as a student pushout phenomenon because public schools were originally created to support a White student population whose looks and needs are nothing like what we see with students who typically drop out of school. The EFHS student population is predominately Hispanic, and four of the five students I interviewed were Hispanic with one being African American. When I asked both adults and students to describe a dropout at EFHS, everyone stated an EFHS dropout was Hispanic and said that since most of their students were in Hispanic, it would make sense the dropouts would be Hispanic. Of the adults I interviewed, three were White, one was Hispanic, and one was African American.

There was also literature that examined the concept of *students at risk vs. schools at risk*. Fine (1991) described in her study an urban public high school with a high drop

out rate, that the school had a pervasive culture of disempowerment, and no one among the staff or community did anything to change the status quo. The administrators, staff, students, and parents knew there were dysfunctional practices in the school that actually pushed already marginalized students out of school and were silent about the situation. Many staff members were unwilling or unable to meet the needs of the marginalized students. The school in Fine's study was a large urban school, with large classes, a challenging student population, a lack of parental involvement, and a staff that found it difficult to truly understand the needs of the students. I thought of EFHS.

In Fine's (1991) school, most of the programming and practices were in place to help the students who already fit the mental model of a *good* student and those students who did not fit that image were further marginalized and shut out from an educational program they deserved, yet people felt seemingly powerless or chose not to do anything about it. I heard this theme in the adult interviews with EFHS staff. The staff in Fine's study as well as the EFHS staff I interviewed considered the marginalized students at-risk but instead should see themselves as part of an at-risk school—a school at-risk of failing students. In fact, they are failing some students. The school district and its practices are also part of the problem. After all, EFHS faculty and staff are only seeking to implement policies and practices set forth by the district or state.

The final section of the literature review examined how the state's school accountability system was in part to blame for placing students at-risk for not graduating. A study by McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, and Heilig (2008) revealed that while the accountability movement in the state of Texas became a national model for

educational reform and raising the bar for student success, it did in fact put more Hispanic and African American students at-risk for dropping out of high school. Public school leaders began to find creative ways to “hide” low-achieving students so they would not take the state test and cause the school or district test scores to be less than acceptable. Students were literally pushed out of schools or held back in a non-tested grade rather than take the state test. There is no evidence that this happened at EFHS.

But because of the state curriculum and testing standards, and as stated by an EFHS staff member, teachers felt compelled to teach the college preparatory curriculum in order to prepare all students for the state test and did not believe they had the flexibility to do anything other than that. According to McNeil et al. (2008), the state’s zero tolerance attendance policy requiring students to attend school 90% of the school year or risk losing credit in a course impacted the drop out rate because many students were missing school due to family and personal issues and could not find time to make up the hours missed. EFHS staff and students referenced this issue in our interviews.

There is much in the literature that explains why we are losing some of our students at EFHS and BVISD and we have to look at ourselves as the problem and the solution—not the students.

### **Responses to Research Questions**

#### **What is the profile of a dropout at Eagle Fork High School between the years of 2007-2013?**

The profile of a dropout would include the characteristics of a Hispanic student, who dropped out at either age 17 or 18, and while they were likely in either the ninth or

eleventh grade. If the students repeated a grade in high school, it was likely the ninth grade. The stated reason for dropping out was most likely withdrawing to enter another public school when in fact there was no record of the students being enrolled in another public school. Participation in extra-curricular courses was sporadic and the data on this was difficult to obtain, thus it was difficult to obtain statistically significant data. The typical dropout at EFHS likely had excessive absenteeism and had a history of discipline infractions.

### **What is causing students to dropout of EFHS?**

This study found that there are many - what some would say- typical causes that lead to students dropping out of high school. For example, many of the students in this study had a history of discipline problems, course failure, and personal and financial problems, and the students that were interviewed indicated a disengagement from school. Yet, there is substantial evidence that shows that we should label the students who left high school prior to graduation as *push-outs* rather than dropouts.

Two of the students had withdrawn from school due to lack of attendance when in fact the students were not attending school because they had to work full time to help support themselves and/or their families. Alternative academic programming would have allowed these students to stay in school and work fulltime. One student just quit attending school because she was so frustrated with a lack of assistance from a teacher who would not help her with math. The student admitted becoming angry and began misbehaving in school prior to giving up and dropping out. Two of the students did not graduate on time with their peers because they had not passed one of the required state



assessments. Three of the students admitted having personal problems outside of school that were impacting their academic progress and school attendance, but did not feel as if the school really cared enough to try to understand what they were going through and to work with them to find ways to keep them in school. It as if the student were to blame for the problems they were having and the school was not willing to meet their need to stay in school and graduate. Thus, the school, the school system, the state educational system, and some could argue, greater society are the ones to blame for the two-hundred and eighty-one students who left EFHS prior to the very important life experience of high school graduation. School, school district, and the state educational policies, procedures, and either the inability or unwillingness to provide appropriate academic programming and instruction for traditionally marginalized students as well as a presence of deficit thinking, actually pushed these students out of high school.

**What are the perceptions of EFHS staff and former students regarding the causes of dropouts and the success of dropout prevention efforts?**

One of the staff perceptions fell under the theme of a description of a dropout, which included sub-themes of student disengagement from school (students quit coming to school) and family/personal issues (students with transient lifestyles, no family support, being poor, and having no positive role models outside of school). A second theme was of a lack of systems in the school (to prevent and/or recover dropouts, to allow students to recover credit, and to keep up with truant students). Another sub-theme was that of a lack academic programming for students who did not want to go to university but preferred a more career-focused academic program.

Student data fell into the themes of school disengagement (being withdrawn from school because of excessive absences and a lack of support from school personnel), family and personal problems (having to work fulltime, pregnancy, and negative influences from peer group), and school life (school personnel did not truly understand the issues the students were facing and did not offer alternate options for completing the high school program).

**What programs are currently in place and were in place within the 2007 through 2013 school years at EFHS to address the dropout problem?**

There were very few formalized, standard dropout prevention/recovery efforts in place. The school registrar maintained the records and alerted appropriate staff when students stopped coming to school. Home visits were made by various school personnel to try to recover dropouts. The school did have a dropout prevention specialist who intervened with at-risk students in order to try to keep them in school or get them back in school. The school staff had created various academic intervention strategies and programs to assist students who were failing classes.

**What recommendations can be made to EFHS and BVISD regarding dropout prevention efforts?**

Recommendations specific to EFHS are outlined later in this chapter.

**Implications for Practice**

We must ensure that our school systems and schools are flexible and humane and truly focused on the needs of students rather than the adults. This means that all adults have to be culturally literate and have a cultural responsive curriculum that honors all

learners, their backgrounds, their heritage, and their person. We must improve teaching and curricula to make school more relevant and engaging and enhance the connection between school and work (Bridgeland et al., 2006). There must be many choices for students and families both within the school and in the school system as a whole, such as different types of classes and schools. Districts should offer a portfolio of options in order to meet the needs of various students and parents. We must have systems in place to monitor students and act immediately to intervene with academic support, a change in schedule to allow for personal and financial issues the student might be facing, or whatever the student needs to succeed. We have to change policies that punish students and instead write policies that offer flexibility while at the same time ensuring that students achieve a high level of success. If a student is failing, the school and district must blame themselves and do whatever it takes to ensure a student graduates from high school prepared for postsecondary endeavors. This should be a non-negotiable for anyone employed in the school system as well having a no-excuses policy in place. Every adult is responsible for every student and connecting with every family. Period.

We must work to educate faculty and staff on deficit thinking in an effort to change teacher and leader attitudes about our students. This would mean that we need to ensure that all faculty and staff learn about the theory of deficit thinking through book studies and a review of all literature on the subject. We must create situations and scenarios in which faculty and leaders are forced to confront their own personal mental models and prejudices about traditionally marginalized students. This will likely be a painful exercise but unless it happens, we will not move forward in the way we work

with our students and families. We must look at successful schools within and outside of our district that are successfully serving traditionally marginalized students as evidenced by near 100% graduation rates and students successfully pursuing postsecondary educational opportunities. Aspiring leaders within our own system should be paired with campus leaders who are anti-deficit thinkers so they may learn what can be in terms of a school culture that ensures the success of all students.

The community-school relationship is essential and the school must spend considerable time and effort to reach out to parents and students that are typically not engaged in school. We are here to serve—truly serve—the public and its young people. Anyone who works in the system and does not demonstrate a service-minded work ethic must no longer be employed by the system. We cannot afford to waste a moment tolerating anything less. Instead we must celebrate those faculty and staff who find creative ways to help all students and are willing to take the risks necessary to find the ways. We must enlist the students in our plans and truly give them a voice in how to run the school. They have many wonderful, creative ideas and very often know what we need to do to help them, if we would only value their voices and listen—we must value their parents' voices too. Their ideas and perspective are powerful and can change the way we do things now. We need to listen, learn, change, and pull students back into the educational process instead of pushing them out.

### **Specific Recommendations for Eagle Fork High School**

Eagle Fork High School administrators, teachers, and counselors must work together to provide options for students who are at-risk for dropping out of high school.

Themes from both student and adult interviews included the issue of school disengagement. While the adults saw the issue as one of students losing interest in school because of outside influences, the student interview data related to the issue of disengagement was focused more on a perceived lack of support from the school and being withdrawn from school without their permission due to excessive absences. Student data also included the theme of a lack of academic programming options for students who had to work fulltime to support themselves and/or their families. Other themes that emerged from the adult interview data were the lack of communication between school personnel, truancy prevention related issues, and a lack of academic programming that focused specifically on school-to-career coursework. Additional student themes included the need for the school to seek to have a true understanding of what issues the students were facing that were causing them to have difficulty staying in school. Recommendations for changes in programming, systems, and processes for Eagle Fork High School are given below.

Academic Programming: The school could offer flexible programming with accelerated classes so that students who needed to work fulltime could attend school for partial days to accommodate work schedules. Classes could consist of accelerated mini-mesters, blended learning classes, web-based classes, night school, and Saturday school. Campus staff could be offered different work schedules to meet the alternative programming needs. The school district could look for ways in which students could participate in work-study programs that offer students the ability to work fulltime and

work towards career certification so that when they graduate from high school, they have a career skill-set to allow them continued employment.

Process Communications Systems: The campus should establish an Attendance Intervention Team that includes administrators, counselors, registrars, and attendance clerks. This team should meet a minimum of bi-weekly to discuss students who have quit coming to school and are potential dropouts. A process for targeting potential dropouts and intervening with these students and their families should be created and shared with faculty and staff. This committee should make recommendations for intervention plans for students at-risk for dropping out. Though the campus has a dropout prevention specialist and because this person's job is very demanding, the school district should provide individuals to assist in finding students who have quit coming to school and assist with alternative programming for those students at-risk for dropping out. District support should include facilitating a problem-solving committee to address staff concerns related to truancy.

Other recommendations include working with staff to understand deficit thinking and how it may impact how they work with traditionally marginalized students. All staff should commit to a *whatever it takes* attitude in working with all students. For those staff members who are not using a differentiated, small-group instructional approach to teaching and learning should receive this training and be closely monitored to ensure successful implementation. District personnel support should provide staff development for these teachers. In addition to the above-mentioned recommendations, the school district needs to create flexible programming options at the feeder middle schools for

students who are at-risk for not being successful in high school. These could include innovative and non-traditional programs within the school year and summer school to allow for middle school students to be better prepared for high school. Similar to the high school, feeder middle schools should create an attendance/at-risk team that meets bi-weekly to discuss students who may be at-risk for dropping out and to recommend alternative programming for these students including but not limited to working with students' families to ensure all students enter ninth grade high school ready. Transition teams consisting of members of both the high school and middle school attendance teams should meet in June of each school year to plan for individual students' successful transitions to high school.

### **Implications for Future Research**

We need to look long-term at students who dropout and what happens to them. We need to know what they are doing five years after they drop out. We need to interview them and ask them what the school, district, or greater society could have done to better serve them. We also need to find students who were at great risk of dropping out of school and received intensive intervention to hold them in school and interview them five years after graduation. We need their perspective on how the school district served them and to see what they are doing with their lives. For systems that do go the extra mile to help students, did the students get a momentary patch to get them graduated or did they end up being successful? Systems must listen to the voices of the people we serve, underserve, or fail. We need to research what it takes to cause educators to have a paradigm shift from deficit thinking to a perspective of seeing students as having great

potential no matter their life circumstances. We need to look at systems that are truly serving all students and find out what is working.

### **The Problem of Practice**

Prior to embarking on this Record of Study, I was selected to be a central office administrator overseeing the teaching and learning at the district's middle and high schools, after serving as a campus-level administrator for ten years. Soon after accepting the position, I became concerned about the fact that we have any dropouts in our school system and began to try to understand the causes of dropping out and to seek solutions. Our district has a very aggressive goal in that over the next five years, we want to double the number of students who complete either a technical certification program, achieve a two-year associate's degree or graduate from a four-year university program after leaving our system. For our system to achieve this goal, and because we are responsible for every students in our system, having just one dropout, is one dropout too many. Therefore, I sought to seek solutions to a real problem facing our school system. This method of seeking to solve a real problem in real time has been termed a *Problem of Practice* and has emerged as a method of study for practicing educational professionals like myself who seek to study a real problem in their field as part of the process of earning a doctoral degree in education. This is described in Lester's work (2004) when he states:

The practitioner view of the work-based doctorate requires that it acts as a vehicle for real-world developments and for high-level professional capability. It



might refer to approaches such as action learning, action research, soft systems methodology or reflective practice... (p. 764)

Lester (2004) also describes efforts in Australia and New Zealand to create doctoral programs designed for the working educational leader in which the educational leader identifies a real problem to be solved in their current educational setting and then studies the research to identify solutions to the problem. Prior to this type of doctoral program that Lester describes as the "...first generation..." (p. 758) of doctoral programs which were "...like the typical PhD, with 'Mode I' knowledge: apparently objective knowledge that is generated by researchers about practice, and applied to it." (p. 758). Lester referenced Donald A. Schön's (1987) work *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* when he describes the first generation of professional doctoral programs:

In Schön's terms (Schön, 1987), they are based in a sequential philosophy that sees research as being applied to practice in a one-way relationship. According to this analysis, first-generation professional doctorates approach professional practice from the perspective of the researcher working on a practice situation, rather than from that of a practitioner working within it. (p. 758)

Lester continues by describing the second generation of doctoral programs when he states:

These doctorates are more accepting of Gibbons *et al.*'s Mode 2 knowledge, which is created and used by practitioner in the context of their practice, and of Schön's constructivist notion of knowledge, where research and practice coexist

in a cyclic or spiral relationship: practice gives rise to new knowledge, which in turn informs change in practice and so on. (p. 758)

Some universities in the United States are also adopting the *Problem of Practice* form of completing an Ed.D. for practicing educational leaders. Vanderbilt University gives us one example of this type of program. Caboni and Proper (2009) describe the program through the lens of a conceptual framework.

The framework begins with students studying the relevant theoretical literature to develop a robust understanding of the knowledge base which informs administrative practice. They also receive training using data analysis techniques that can be used to answer questions related to challenges faced by real schools or colleges. Finally, they learn to contextualize and tailor solutions to the specific challenge to which, and institution in which, they are proposing solutions. (p. 64)

The Vanderbilt program includes a final “Capstone Project” (Caboni & Proper, 2009, p. 2) in which the student works with other members of their cohort group to analyze a specific problem within their own organization, review literature on the problem as well as literature on organizations, and use both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to answer questions about the identified problem. Texas A&M University offered a similar Problem of Practice program for people like myself who wanted to study a real problem in the school system where they were working and perhaps see immediate benefits from implementing recommendations from the research study they conducted.

## Personal Reflection

This study has opened my mind in many ways and caused me to look closely at not just EFHS or BVISD but the entire public education system. It has also left me with many yet unanswered questions. What can we do to shift the paradigm of who is at the center of the dropout dilemma? The wrongdoer is not the student but the adults who work in the system and the system itself. We cannot have a one-size-fits-all mentality and we have to be flexible to meet the students' needs. There seems to be a black and white palette against which students are being held—no gray. There is an expression heard in the medical field when a patient is not treated well – *physician, heal thyself*. As educators, we need to say – *educators, heal thyself*. We are the problem. The child is a victim but not of their own circumstances but because of what we do or don't do for them. It starts in many cases when they are in the early years of our public school systems so that by the time they reach high school, many are so disengaged and hopeless, they choose to leave us. And we let them because if they stayed, they would only remind us of how we fail them every day or remind us of how powerless we are in helping them. If they are gone, we no longer have to think of them and our inadequacies. If they are gone, they are no longer our concern and they can fend for themselves—after all, they didn't comply by our rules and it is their fault they failed.

Why are we so rule-oriented and narrow in our thinking, so much so that we cannot see we have options to help all students? What are the philosophical biases that hold us back from looking at options? School leaders must ask themselves how we can raise our staff to be more flexible and bend the rules a bit to help all students. How do

we build that judgment in a staff to know when to bend the rules and not be scared to do so? When students are failing, we need to seek to understand instead of blaming. In an effort to have students comply with our rules, practices, policies, and procedures, we punish them when they don't and hope that things change. Do we think punishing them does any good? What do the students really hear and feel when we punish them or blame them for not succeeding. Are we sending the right message? I think not. Adults may be totally unaware of the messages they are sending to the students and we often do not check for understanding. We blame the student.

Many of us are, in fact, deficit thinkers. Unless we can change our thinking, we must leave the system before we hurt and fail more students.

### **Conclusion**

Years ago, I was a brand new, neophyte assistant principal who moved from a teaching position at an elementary school located in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the nation to help open a brand new elementary school located in the middle of one of the highest poverty neighborhoods in our city. I thought I was prepared because I had taught for many years in every type of community—urban poor, suburban middle class, on an army infantry base in what was then West Germany prior the end of the Cold War, and in a rural community surrounded by cotton fields in central Texas. But I soon learned I was dealing students I had never before experienced working with. All the issues associated with poverty hit me in the face every day and as a school leader, I felt ill equipped to handle the needs of the students. I heard myself and the faculty talk about these students in what I now know was a deficit mindset, while at the same time

knowing it was our responsibility to make sure these students succeeded. How were we, as school leaders, going to help our faculty and staff move past the deficit mindset and begin putting things in place to ensure the success of all of the students? Their parents dropped them off at school, put them on the bus, or watched them walk away from the apartment every day and trusted us to make sure their children were educated. We had to believe we could educate them.

I attended a conference near the time we opened the school that caused me to reflect on the challenges we faced and the beliefs we had about “our children.” In one session, I heard something that literally shifted my paradigm from deficit thinking to a way of thinking about “our” children in an entirely different paradigm. The theme of the session was *What is your image of the child?* The presenters asked us to shift our thinking about children from poverty arriving at our school each day with limited ability and desire to learn. She challenged us to see them in a whole new light—not as poor, underprivileged children with limited skills and knowledge; but instead see them as young people full of potential and capable of accomplishing great things in their lives. They further stated that unless we embrace this way of thinking, we would fail multitudes of young, bright, eager learners. I did embrace this thinking and set about continuing my work as an educator with an anti-deficit mindset.

This study caused me to reflect on how we educate, serve, and ensure the success of every student. We must restructure and reframe our practices, programs, and philosophies about teaching and learning so that we do not push one student out of our schools. Deficit thinking is causing us to give up on some of our children and giving up

on one, is one too many. They are in fact all of our children and capable of accomplishing greatness. We must ensure that all schools and school systems embrace this belief and act on it—accepting nothing less.

They are all of our children. We are all responsible for their success.

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## APPENDIX A

### RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE GRADUATION SUCCESS TASK FORCE

	Group who made suggestion/consideration			
<b>Graduation Success Task Force Suggestions or Items for Consideration</b>	<b>Dropout Prevention</b>	<b>Alternative Programming</b>	<b>Dropout Recovery</b>	<b>Attendance</b>
<b>Programming Suggestions</b>				
Find or designate facilities to provide night classes and/or Saturday classes for students (typically 18 - 23) recovered to system with children			X	
Offer Flexible Scheduling to include partial day program			X	X
Offer Accelerated Programming with mini-mester or quarter system - use quarter system to double-block courses to earn credit at faster pace (2 - 2.5 months)			X	
Increase access to technical courses and develop technical/vocational programs with certifications so student can earn certificates allowing them entry to work.			X	
Provide Webcast classes that students can take from home or can attend when out ill (Determine "Master Teachers" in district to be recorder - look at U of H or Texas A & M's system)			X	
Develop Alternative Programming to meet the needs of reclassified students		X		

Revamp programming to include individual education plan for each student.		X		
Design Blended School Programs with traditional and innovative programming		X		
Offer innovative and non-traditional programs for summer school courses for 8th grade students identified at-risk		X		
Explore School within a School programming		X		
Utilize technology to meet needs of students		X		
Use Freshmen year to explore careers & build portfolios		X		
Design programs with freedom of choice in schedules and school setting		X		
<b>Process Suggestions</b>				
Explore feasibility of offering more required high school credit courses in 8th grade to free up high school schedule.		X		
<b>Process Suggestions Continued</b>				
Consider moving from a grade level concept to a credit concept; Change from grade level counselors/assistant principals to alphabet system so student have same counselor/AP regardless of number of credits.		X		
Tie Career Exploration with course selections and increase focus on student's future rather than a set curriculum for all.		X		
Examine districts with separate 9th grade centers to assess their success. Evaluate		X		

school programs within district in which 9th grade students are more isolated for part of the day to determine success. Based on evaluation, make recommendations if any.				
Put middle school students who have failing grades into a more flexible schedule and target them into a special grouping		X		
Attendance Process to include: 1) Campus ADA monitors attendance; 2) Referral to Stay In School Program; 3) Establish an Attendance Intervention Task Force at each campus; & 4) Offer specific interventions to student and family- suggestions offered in our last minutes.				X
Communication System: The group is recommending that each campus have a communication system in place to ensure that the Dropout Prevention Specialist, Parent Liaison, counselor, administrator and any other staff member are not being repetitive in their interventions with students. This may look different at each campus depending on personnel.	X			
Develop Transition Plans and process to assist with successful transition from 5th to 6th and 8th to 9th grades	X	X		
<b>Personnel Suggestions</b>				
<b>Dropout Prevention/Recovery Specialist:</b>	X			X

Hire a dropout prevention/recovery specialist on every SBISD campus or available for every SBISD campus based on student need. Some campuses may need a full time specialist while others may be able to share. Alternately, establish a new position at each school to lead the Attendance Intervention Task Force and work pro-actively with students individually to find resources to keep students in school.				
<b>Parent Liaison/Parent Center:</b> Each campus should have a Parent Liaison to implement a program with both structured school wide programs (PIQUE, Parent Center, Parent Support Groups etc.) and individual parent/student caseloads. This person would work closely with the Dropout Prevention/Recovery Specialist.	X			X
<b>Other Suggestions</b>				
Offer payment for school attendance/satisfactory progress in school	X			
Have a residential school available for students in need of short term support and stability	X			

APPENDIX B  
INFORMATION SHEET

**For School Staff**

**The Profile of a Dropout at a Suburban High School in Houston, Texas:**

**Recommendations for Dropout Prevention and Recovery**

**Principal Investigator**

Pamela W. Butler – Doctoral student, Texas A & M University

**Introduction**

The purpose of this form is to provide you, an administrator or staff member (as a prospective research study participant) information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research.

You have been asked to participate in a research study that will focus on the dropouts at one of our district's high schools as a case study of one high school's dropout prevention efforts. The purpose of this study is to conduct an in-depth study of the attending students at your high school between the years of 2007-2010 school years, examine the program in place to reduce the number of dropout and, based on that, to develop and recommend a plan that will reduce the number of students who drop out of your high school and the district as a whole. You were selected to be a possible participant because you worked at the school between the years of 2007 and 2010 and worked with students who may or may not have dropped out of high school during the years of 2007-2010.

**What will I be asked to do?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview of 45-60 minutes.

Your participation will be recorded and transcribed. *It is not mandatory to have the interview audio taped; if you do not wish to have your interview audio taped the researcher will take manual notes of the interview and your answers.*

**What are the risks involved in this study?**

The risks associated with this study are minimal and not any greater than feeling uncomfortable as we discuss students who dropped out of your high school.

**What are the possible benefits of this study?**

You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, the results of this study may inform district programming to help prevent students from dropping out of our high schools as well as inform practices in other districts.

**Do I have to participate?**

No. Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without your current or future relations with Texas A&M University being affected.

**Who will know about my participation in this research study?**

This study is confidential. Confidentiality will be maintained through the use of a number coding system to identify participants.

The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Information about you



will be kept confidential to the extent permitted or required by law. Research records will be stored securely and only Pamela W. Butler, the researcher, and her dissertation committee will have access to the records.

If you choose to participate in this study and choose to be audio recorded, any audio recordings will be stored securely and only Pamela W. Butler, the researcher, and her university faculty committee will have access to the recordings. Any recordings will be kept for one year and then erased.

Please check the appropriate box:

- ☐ I agree to have our interview audio recorded.
- ☐ I do not give permission for our interview to be audio recorded.

**Whom do I contact with questions about the research?**

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Pamela W. Butler at \_\_\_\_\_ or via email at [pamelawbutler@att.net](mailto:pamelawbutler@att.net). If you feel you are being mistreated in any way because of your participation or choice not to participate, you should feel free to contact \_\_\_\_\_, Associate Superintendent for curriculum and Instruction for \_\_\_\_\_ ISD, \_\_\_\_\_ or via email at \_\_\_\_\_

**Whom do I contact about my rights as a research participant?**

This research study has been reviewed by the Human Subjects' Protection Program and/or the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you can contact these offices at (979) 458-4067 or [irb@tamu.edu](mailto:irb@tamu.edu).

## **Participation**

Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions and received answers to your satisfaction. If you would like to be in the study, please sign in the spaces provided for participants.

Name and signature of the person who explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

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Signature and printed name of person who obtained consent    Date

You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. Your signature on this page indicates that you understand what you are being asked to do and you voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are waiving any of your legal rights.

**Printed Name of Participant** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date**

**Signature of Participant** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date**

**Signature of Principal Investigator** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date**

## **INFORMATION SHEET**

### **For Students**

#### **The Profile of a Dropout at a Suburban High School in Houston, Texas:**

#### **Recommendations for Dropout Prevention and Recovery**

#### **Principal Investigator**

Pamela W. Butler – Doctoral student, Texas A & M University

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this form is to provide you, a student (as a prospective research study participant) information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research.

You have been asked to participate in a research study that will seek to create a profile of a dropout in our district as well as dropout prevention and recovery programs in place during the same time period. The purpose of this study is to conduct an in-depth study of the attending students at your high school between the years of 2007-2010 school years, examine the program in place to reduce the number of dropout and to develop a plan that will reduce the number of students who drop out of your high school and the district as a whole. You were selected to be a possible participant because you attended the school between the years of 2007 and 2010 and may or may not have dropped out of high school during the years of 2007-2010.

**What will I be asked to do?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview of 45-60 minutes.

Your participation will be recorded and transcribed. *It is not mandatory to have the interview audio taped; if you do not wish to have your interview audio taped the researcher will take manual notes of the interview and your answers.*

**What are the risks involved in this study?**

The risks associated with this study are minimal and not any greater than feeling uncomfortable as we discuss students who dropped out of your high school.

**What are the possible benefits of this study?**

You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, the results of this study may inform district programming to help prevent students from dropping out of our high schools as well as inform practices in other districts.

**Do I have to participate?**

No. Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without your current or future relations with Texas A&M University being affected.

**Who will know about my participation in this research study?**

This study is confidential. Confidentiality will be maintained through the use of a number coding system to identify participants.

The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Information about you

will be kept confidential to the extent permitted or required by law. Research records will be stored securely and only Pamela W. Butler, the researcher, and her dissertation committee will have access to the records.

If you choose to participate in this study and choose to be audio recorded, any audio recordings will be stored securely and only Pamela W. Butler, the researcher, and her university faculty committee will have access to the recordings. Any recordings will be kept for one year and then erased.

Please check the appropriate box:

☐ I agree to have our interview audio recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_ Student Signature or Parent Signature if  
student is under 18 years of age

☐ I do not give permission for our interview to be audio recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_ Student Signature or Parent Signature if  
student is under 18 years of age

**Whom do I contact with questions about the research?**

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Pamela W. Butler at \_\_\_\_\_, or via email at [pamelawbutler@att.net](mailto:pamelawbutler@att.net). If you feel you are being mistreated in any way because of your participation or choice not to participate, you

should feel free to contact \_\_\_\_\_, Associate Superintendent for curriculum and Instruction for \_\_\_\_\_ ISD, \_\_\_\_\_ or via email at \_\_\_\_\_

**Whom do I contact about my rights as a research participant?**

This research study has been reviewed by the Human Subjects' Protection Program and/or the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you can contact these offices at (979) 458-4067 or [irb@tamu.edu](mailto:irb@tamu.edu).

**Participation**

Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions and received answers to your satisfaction. If you would like to be in the study, please sign in the spaces provided for participants.

Name and signature of the person who explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

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Signature and printed name of person who obtained consent Date

You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. Your signature on this page indicates that you understand what you are being asked to do and you voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are waiving any of your legal rights.

**Printed Name of Participant**

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**Signature of Participant Date**

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**Signature of Parent is student is less than 18 years of age Date**

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**Signature of Principal Investigator Date**

## APPENDIX C

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

#### Adult

The Profile of a Dropout at a Suburban High School in Houston, Texas:

#### Recommendations for Dropout Prevention and Recovery

1. Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. The purpose of this interview is for me to understand the drop out programs in place here and how effective you believe they were. We are going to start out with some general questions and then I will ask you about specific programs having to do with dropout prevention programs and prevention.
2. How did you become a teacher? Tell me a little about your teaching career. (For administrator, ask how they became a school leader and about their administrative career?)
3. Did you work at this school during the years of 2007-2010?
4. If yes, what was your role at this school? Describe your main duties at that time?
5. Are you aware of any dropout prevention or recovery programs in place during the years of 2007-2010? If so, what were they?
6. Did you believe that these programs were successful? Please explain why you feel this way.
7. Can you explain an area of dropout or recovery that is currently not being addressed by your campus that needs more focus?
8. If you were to describe the typical dropout at your campus, who would that student be? (Probes: ethnicity, gender, economics)
9. To you, what are the first indicators that a student is going to dropout before they actually dropout?
10. As a district, what do you think the district can do to better address the issue of dropouts on this campus and be more effective in assisting with dropout recovery?
11. Have you heard or seen of a dropout program from another school or district that you wish would be brought to your campus? If so, explain what it is and why you think it would be good to implement.
12. Are there any other comments you would like to add?



## INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### Students

1. Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. It is very nice to meet you. We are meeting today so I can ask you some questions about dropping out of school and how to prevent it. I'm going to start by asking you some general questions and then I'll ask more about your experiences at school with dropout prevention or recovering dropouts to get them to return to school.
2. What years did you attend Northbrook High School?
3. What grade levels did you attend while at the school?
4. Did you like attending high school?
5. What was your favorite part?
6. Did you graduate from Northbrook High School or somewhere else?
7. (If student dropped out), what grade were you in when you dropped out of high school?
8. (If student dropped out), what was your main reason for dropping out?
9. (For everyone), what does a typical dropout student look like at your campus? (Probes: ethnicity, economics, gender)
10. What do you see usually going on with a student before they dropout?
11. When a student is struggling, have you seen an adult talking or meeting with the student? If so, who usually talks to the student?
12. Do you think talking to an adult helps the student stay in school? Why or why not?
13. Did you or any of your friends ever participate in a dropout prevention program? If so, do you remember what it was called or what it was like? If so, do you think it helped the struggling student?
14. Is there something the adults at the school could do better to help when a student is considering dropping out? If yes, what do you think they could do?
15. What do you think the adults at the school could do better to get a student who dropped out to come back to school?
16. Are there any other comments you would like to add?
17. Thank you very much for helping me better understand issues with dropouts and how better to help them stay in school.

APPENDIX D  
IRB AND DISTRICT APPROVAL LETTERS

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY  
DIVISION OF RESEARCH - OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE AND BIOSAFETY

1186 TAMU, General Services Complex  
College Station, TX 77843-1186  
750 Agronomy Road, #3501

979.458.1467  
FAX 979.862.3176  
<http://researchcompliance.tamu.edu>

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Human Subjects Protection Program

Institutional Review Board

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**APPROVAL DATE:** 22-May-2012

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** BUTLER, PAMELA WILSON

77843-3578

**FROM:** Office of Research Compliance  
Institutional Review Board

**SUBJECT:** Initial Review

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**Protocol**

2012-0178

**Number:**

**Title:** The Profile of a Dropout at a Suburban High School in Houston, Texas:  
Recommendations for Dropout Prevention and Recovery

**Review**  
Expedited

**Category:**

**Approval**  
22-May-2012 To 21-May-2013  
**Period:**

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**Approval determination was based on the following Code of Federal Regulations:**

Eligible for Expedite Approval (45 CFR 46.110): Identification of the subjects or their responses (or the remaining procedures involving identification of subjects or their responses) will NOT reasonably place them at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the their financial standing, employability, insurability, reputation, or be stigmatizing, unless reasonable and appropriate protections will be implemented so that risks related to invasion of privacy and breach of confidentiality are no greater than minimal.

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Criteria for Approval has been met (45 CFR 46.111) - The criteria for approval listed in 45 CFR 46.111 have been met (or if previously met, have not changed).

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(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

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(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation or quality assurance methodologies.

(Note: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the

protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b) (3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

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**Provisions:**

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**Comments:**

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This research project has been approved. As principal investigator, you assume the following responsibilities

1. **Continuing Review:** The protocol must be renewed each year in order to continue with the research project. A Continuing Review along with required documents must be submitted 45 days before the end of the approval period. Failure to do so may result in processing delays and/or non-renewal.
2. **Completion Report:** Upon completion of the research project (including data analysis and final written papers), a Completion Report must be submitted to the IRB Office.
3. **Adverse Events:** Adverse events must be reported to the IRB Office immediately.
4. **Amendments:** Changes to the protocol must be requested by submitting an Amendment to the IRB Office for review. The Amendment must be approved by the IRB before being implemented.
5. **Informed Consent:** Information must be presented to enable persons to voluntarily decide whether or not to participate in the research project unless otherwise waived as noted above.

This electronic document provides notification of the review results by the Institutional Review Board.

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN SCHOOL DISTRICT

February 19, 2012

To Whom It May Concern,

As Director of Program Evaluation and Research for the \_\_\_\_\_ Independent  
School District, I give Pamela W. Butler permission to recruit staff members and  
students at \_\_\_\_\_ High School for participation in her research.

Sincerely,

\_\_\_\_\_

Director of Program Evaluation and Research

\_\_\_\_\_ Independent School District